The CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON A HOUSEBOAT

GRACE BROOKS HILL

"There they are!" cried Ruth, clasping Mr. Howbridge's arm in her excitement. "The same two men!"

Frontispiece.

THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON A HOUSEBOAT

HOW THEY SAILED AWAY
WHAT HAPPENED ON THE VOYAGE
AND WHAT WAS DISCOVERED

BY

GRACE BROOKS HILL

AUTHOR OF "THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS," "THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS SNOWBOUND," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
THELMA GOOCH

PUBLISHERS
BARSE & CO.
NEW YORK, N. Y. NEWARK, N. J.

Copyright, 1920
By
BARSE & CO.

CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON A HOUSEBOAT

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	"What's That?"	9
II	Neale Has News	19
III	The Elevator	29
IV	An Auto Ride	40
V	The Houseboat	52
VI	More News	57
VII	Making Plans	69
VIII	The Robbery	79
IX	All Aboard	88
X	A Stowaway	99
XI	Overboard	107
XII	Neale Wonders	117
XIII	The Trick Mule	125
XIV	At the Circus	134
XV	Real News at Last	143
XVI	Ruth's Alarm	150
XVII	Up the River	160
XVIII	The Night Alarm	169
XIX	On the Lake	179

Contents

CHAPTER		PAGE
XX	Drifting	188
XXI	The Storm	196
XXII	On the Island	204
XXIII	Suspicions	214
XXIV	Closing In	225
XXV	The Capture	238

ILLUSTRATIONS

"There they are!" cried Ruth, clasping Mr. Howbridge's arm in the excitement. "The same two men!" *Frontispiece.*

PAGE

"Get us down!" cried Dot and Tess in a chorus, while Mrs. MacCall stood beneath them holding out her apron 42

While Dot and Tess clung to one another, Hank managed to fish up the "A''ce-doll" . . 118

"You shouldn't have come here, Aggie!" he cried above the noise of the storm. . . . 203

THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON A HOUSEBOAT

CHAPTER I

"WHAT'S THAT?"

DELICIOUS and appetizing odors filled the kitchen of the old Corner House. They were wafted even to the attic, were those whiffs and fragrant zephyrs. Some of them even escaped through the open windows, causing Uncle Rufus to cease his slow and laborious task of picking up some papers from the newly cut lawn.

"Dat suah smells mighty good—mighty good!" murmured the old darkey to himself, as he straightened up by the process of putting one hand to the small of his back and pressing there, as though a spring needed adjusting. "Dat suah smells mighty good! Mrs. Mac mus' suah be outdoin' of herse'f dish yeah mawnin'!"

He turned his wrinkled face toward the Corner House, again sniffing deeply.

A pleased and satisfied look came over his countenance as the cooking odors emanating from the kitchen became more pronounced.

"Dey's suah to be some left—dey suah is, 'cause hit's Miss Ruth's party, an' she's always gen'rus wif de eatin's. She suah is. Dey's suah to be some left."

He removed his hand from the small of his back, thereby allowing himself to fall forward again in the proper position for picking up papers, and went on with his work.

Inside the kitchen, where the odors were even more pronounced, as one might naturally expect to find them, two girls and a pleasant-faced woman were busy; though not more so than a fresh-appearing Finnish maid, who hummed an air full of minor strains as she opened the oven door now and then, thereby letting out more odors which were piled upon, mingled with, and otherwise added to those already bringing such a delicious sensation to Uncle Rufus.

"Aren't you planning too much, Ruth?" asked her sister Agnes, as the girl addressed carefully placed a wondrously white napkin over a plate of freshly baked macaroons. "I mean the girls will never eat all this," and she waved her hand to include a side table on which were many more plates, some empty, awaiting their burden from the oven, while others were covered with white linen like some mysterious receptacles under a stage magician's serviette.

"Oh, don't worry about that!" laughed Ruth. "My only worry is that I shall not have enough."

"Well, for the land's sake! how many do you expect?" demanded Agnes Kenway.

"Six. But there will be you and me and—"

"Then Mr. Howbridge *is* coming!" cried Agnes, as if there had been some question about it, though this was the first time his name had been mentioned that morning.

"He *may* come," answered Ruth quietly.

"He *may!* Oh my stars! As if you didn't *know* he was coming!" retorted Agnes. "Is it in—er—his official capacity?"

"I asked Mr. Howbridge to come to advise us about forming the society," Ruth said. "I thought it best to start right. If we are going to be of any use as a Civic Betterment Club in Milton we must be on a firm foundation, and—"

"Hear! Hear!" interrupted Agnes, banging on the table with an agate mixing spoon, and thereby bringing from a deep pantry the form and face of Mrs. MacCall, the sturdy Scotch housekeeper.

"Please don't do that!" begged Ruth.

"Hoots! Whut's meanin' wi' the rattlin' an' thumpin'?" demanded Mrs. MacCall.

"Oh, some nonsense of Agnes'," answered Ruth. "I was just telling her that I had asked the girls to luncheon, to talk over the new Civic Betterment Club, and that Mr. Howbridge is coming to advise us how to get a charter, or incorporate, or whatever is proper and—"

"I was only applauding after the fashion in the English Parliament," interrupted Agnes. "They always say 'Hear! Hear!' away down in their throats."

"Well, they don't bang on tables with granite spoons," retorted Ruth, as she handed a pie to Linda, the humming Finnish maid, who popped it into the oven, quickly shutting the door, to allow none of the heat to escape.

"Hoot! I would not put it past 'em, I would not!" murmured Mrs. MacCall. "What those English law makers do—I wouldna' put it past them!" and, shaking her head, she retired into the deep pantry again.

"Well, you're going to have enough of sweets, I should say;" observed Agnes, "even as fond as Mr. Howbridge is of them. For the land's sake, aren't you going to stop?" she demanded, as Ruth poured into a dish the cake batter she had begun to stir as soon as the pie was completed.

"This is the last. You don't need to stay and help me any longer if you don't want to, dear. Run out and play," urged Ruth sweetly.

"Run out and play! As if I were Dot or Tess! I like that! Why, I was thinking of asking you to let me join the society!"

"Oh, of course you may, Agnes! I didn't think you'd care for it. Why, certainly you may join! We want to get as many into it as we can. Do come to the meeting this afternoon.

Mr. Howbridge is going to explain everything, and I thought we might as well make it a little social affair. It was very good of you to help me with the baking."

"Oh, I like that. And I believe I will come to the meeting. Now shall we clean up?"

"I do him," interposed Linda. "I wash him all up," and a sweep of her muscular arm indicated the pots, pans, dishes and all the odds and ends left from the rather wholesale baking.

"Oh, I shall be so glad if you will!" exclaimed Ruth. "I want to go over the parlor and library again. And I wonder what has become of Dot and Tess. I asked them to get me some wild flowers, but they have been gone over an hour and—"

The voice of Mrs. MacCall from the deep pantry interrupted.

"Hi, Tess! Hi, Dot!" she called. "Where ha' ye been? Come ye here the noo, and be for me waukrife minnie."

"What in the world does she mean?" asked Agnes, for sometimes, well versed as she was in the Scotch of the housekeeper, there were new words and phrases that needed translating. Especially as it seemed to the girls that more and more Mrs. MacCall was falling back into her childhood speech as she grew older—a speech she had dropped during her younger life except in moments of excitement.

This time, however, it was beyond even the "ken" of Ruth, who rather prided herself on her Highland knowledge. But Mrs. MacCall herself had heard the question. Out she came from the pantry, smiling broadly.

"Ye no ken 'waukrife minnie'?" she asked. "Ah, 'tis a pretty little verse o' Rabbie Burns. I'll call it o'er the noo."

Then she gave them, with all the burring of which her tongue was capable:

"Whare are you gaun, my bonnie lass,
Whare are you gaun, my hinnie?
She answered me right saucilie,
An errand for my minnie."

Coming down to earth again, Mrs. MacCall shot back into the pantry and from an open window in the rear that looked out in the orchard she called:

"Hi, Tess! Hi, Dot! Come ye here, and be for me the lassies that'll gang to the store."

"Are Tess and Dot there?" asked Ruth. "I've been wondering where they had disappeared to."

"They be coming the noo," answered Mrs. MacCall. "Laden in their arms wi' all sorts of the trash." And then she sang again:

"O fare thee well, my bonnie lass,
O fare thee well, my hinnie!
Thou art a gay an' a bonnie lass,
But thou has a waukrife minnie."

"What in the world is a 'waukrife minnie'?" asked Agnes, but there was no chance to answer, for in the kitchen, making it more busy than ever, trooped the two younger members of the Corner House girls quartette—Tess and Dot.

Their arms were filled with blossoms of the woods and fields, and without more ado they tossed them to a cleared place on the table, whence Linda had removed some of the pans and dishes.

"Oh, what a lovely lot of flowers!" cried Ruth. "It's just darling of you to get them for me. Now do you want to help me put them into vases in the library?"

Dot shook her head.

"Why not?" asked Ruth gently.

"I promised my Alice-doll to take her down by the brook, and I just have to do it," answered Dot. "And Tess is going to help me; aren't you, Tess?" she added.

"Yes," was the answer. "I'm going to take Almira."

"Then you must take her kittens, too!" insisted Dot. "She'll feel bad if you don't."

"I won't take 'em all—I'll take one kitten," compromised Tess. "There she is, now!" And Tess darted from the room to pounce on the cat, which did not seem to mind very much being mauled by the children.

"Will ye gang a'wa' to the store the noo?" asked Mrs. MacCall, with a warm smile as she

came from the pantry. "There's muckle we need an'—"

"I'll go if you give me a cookie," promised Dot.

"So'll I," chimed in Tess, coming in on the tribute. "We can take Almira and your Alice-doll when we come back," she confided to her sister.

"Yes, I think they'll wait. I know Alice-doll will, but I'm not so sure about Almira," and Dot seemed rather in doubt. "She may take a notion to carry her kittens up in the bedroom—"

"Don't dare suggest such a thing!" cried Ruth. "I'm to have company this afternoon, and if that cat and her kittens appear on the scene—"

"Oh, I wasn't going to carry them in!" interrupted Dot, with an air of injured innocence. "They're Almira's kittens, and she can do what she likes with them, I suppose," she added as an afterthought. "Only I know that every once in a while she takes a notion to plant them in a new place. Once Uncle Rufus found them in his rubber boots, and they scratched him like anything when he put his foot inside."

"Well, if you have to go to the store for Mrs. MacCall you won't have any time to help me arrange the flowers," observed Ruth, anxious to put an end to the discussion about the family cat and kittens, for she knew Dot had a fund of stories concerning them.

"Yes, traipse along now, my bonnie bairns,"

advised the Scotch housekeeper, and, bribed by two cookies each, a special good measure on Saturday, Dot and Tess were soon on their way, or at least it was so supposed.

Linda was helping Mrs. MacCall clear away the baking utensils, and Ruth and Agnes were in the parlor and library, tastefully arranging the wild flowers that Dot and Tess had gathered.

"Isn't Dot queer to cling still to her dolls?" remarked Agnes, as she stepped back to get the effect of a bunch of red flowers against a dark brown background in one corner of the room.

"Yes, she is a strange child. And poor Almira! Really I don't see how that cat stands it here, the way Tess and Dot maul her."

"They aren't as bad as Sammy Pinkney. Actually I caught him yesterday tying the poor creature to the back of Billy Bumps!"

"Not on the goat's back!" cried Ruth.

"Really, he was. I sent him flying, though!"

"What was his idea?"

"Oh, he said he'd heard Neale tell how, in a circus, a little dog rode on a pony's back and Sammy didn't see why a cat couldn't ride on a goat."

"Well, if he put it that way I suppose she could," assented Ruth. "But Almira seems to take herself very seriously with all those kittens. We really must get rid of them. Vacation will soon be here, and with Tess and Dot around the

house all day, instead of just Saturdays, I don't know what we shall do."

"Have you made any vacation plans at all?"

"Not yet, Agnes. I thought I'd wait until I saw Mr. Howbridge at the club meeting this afternoon."

"What has he to do with our vacation—unless he's going along?"

"Oh, no, I didn't mean that, at all! But the financial question does enter into it; and as he is our guardian and has charge of our money, I want to know just how much we can count on spending."

"Why, have we lost any money?"

"Not that I know of. I hope not! But I always have consulted him before we made any summer plans, and I don't see why we should not now."

"Well, I suppose it's all right," assented Agnes, as she took up another bunch of flowers. "But I wonder—"

She never finished that sentence. From somewhere, inside or outside the house, a resounding crash sounded. It shook the walls and floors.

"Oh, my! what's that?" cried Ruth, dropping the blossoms from her hands and hastening to the hall.

CHAPTER II

NEALE HAS NEWS

DEEP, and perhaps portentous, silence had succeeded the crash. But both Ruth and Agnes knew enough of the goings and comings in the Corner House not to take this silence for serenity. It meant something, as the crash had.

"What was it?" murmured Ruth again, and she fairly ran out into the hall, followed by her sister.

Then came a series of bumps, as if something of no small size was rolling down the porch steps. By this time it was evident that the racket came from without and not from within. Then a voice cried:

"Hold it! Hold it! Don't let it roll down!"

"That's Dot!" declared Ruth.

And then a despairing voice cried:

"I can't! I can't hold it! Look out!"

Once again the rumbling, rolling, bumping sound came, and with it was mingled the warning of the Scotch housekeeper and the wail of Dot who cried:

"Oh, she's dead! She's smashed!"

"Something really has happened this time!"

exclaimed Ruth, and her face became a little pale.

"If only it isn't serious," burst out Agnes. "Oh, dear, what those youngsters don't think of for trouble!"

"They don't mean to get into trouble, Agnes. It's only their thoughtlessness."

"Well then, they ought to think more. Oh, listen to that, will you!" Agnes added, as another loud bumping reached the two sisters' ears.

"It's something that's sure," cried Ruth, and grew paler than ever.

The happening was not really as tragic as it seemed, yet it was sufficiently momentous to cause a fright to the two older girls. Especially to Ruth, who felt herself to be, as she literally was, a mother to the other three; though now that Agnes was putting up her hair and putting down her dresses a new element had come into the household.

While yet in tender years the responsibilities of life had fallen on the shoulders of Ruth Kenway. In their former home—a city more pretentious in many ways than picturesque Milton, their present home—the Kenways had lived in what, literally, was a tenement house. Their father and mother were dead, and the small pension granted Mr. Kenway, who had been a soldier in the Spanish war, was hardly sufficient for the needs of four growing girls.

Then, almost providentially, it seemed, the Stower estate had come to Ruth, Agnes, Dot and Tess. Uncle Peter Stower had passed away, and Mr. Howbridge, the administrator of the estate, had discovered the four sisters as the next of kin, to use his legal phrase.

Uncle Peter Stower had lived for years in the "Corner House" as it was called. The mansion stood opposite the Parade Ground in Milton, and there Uncle Rufus, the colored servant of his crabbed master, had spent so many years that he regarded himself as a fixture—as much so as the roof.

At first no will could be found, though Mr. Howbridge recalled having drawn one; but eventually all legal tangles were straightened out, and the four sisters came to live in Milton, as related in the first book of the series, entitled "The Corner House Girls."

There was Ruth, the oldest and the "little mother," though she was not so very little now. In fact she had blossomed into a young lady, a fact of which Mr. Howbridge became increasingly aware each day.

So the four girls had come to live at the Corner House, and that was only the beginning of their adventures. In successive volumes are related the happenings when they went to school, when they had a jolly time under canvas, and when they took part in a school play.

The odd find made in the garret of the Corner House furnished material for a book in itself and paved the way for a rather remarkable tour in an auto.

In those days the Corner House girls became acquainted with a brother and sister, Luke and Cecile Shepard. Luke was a college youth, and the friendship between him and Ruth presently ripened into a deep regard for each other. But Luke had to go back to college, so Ruth saw very little of him, though the young folks corresponded freely.

All this was while the Corner House girls were "growing up." In fact, it became necessary to tell of that in detail, so that the reason for many things that happened in the book immediately preceding this, which is called "The Corner House Girls Snowbound," could be understood.

In that volume the Corner House girls become involved in the mysterious disappearance of two small twins, and after many exciting days spent in the vicinity of a lumber camp a clue to the mystery was hit upon.

But now the memory of the blizzard days spent in the old Lodge were forgotten. For summer had come, bringing with it new problems, not the least of which was to find a place where vacation days might be spent.

Ruth proposed to speak of that when her guardian called this Saturday afternoon. As she had

hinted to Agnes, Ruth had invited a number of girl friends to luncheon. It was the plan to form a sort of young people's Civic Club, to take up several town matters, and Ruth was the moving spirit in this, for she loved to work toward some definite end.

This Saturday was no exception in being a busy one at the Corner House.

In pursuance of her plans she had enlisted the whole household in preparing for the event, from Mrs. MacCall, who looked after matters in general, Linda, who helped with the baking, Uncle Rufus, who was cleaning the lawn, down to Dot and Tess, who had been sent for flowers.

And then had come the bribing of Dot and Tess to go to the store and, following that, the crash.

"What can it be?" murmured Ruth, as she and Agnes hastened on. "Some one surely must be hurt."

"I hope not," half whispered Agnes.

From the side porch came the sound of childish anguish.

"She's all flatted out, that's what she is! She's all flatted out, my Alice-doll is, and it's all your fault, Tess Kenway! Why didn't you hold the barrel?"

"I couldn't, I told you! It just rolled and it rolled. It's a good thing it didn't roll on Almira!"

"Gracious! did you hear that?" cried Agnes. "What can they have been doing?"

The two older sisters reached the porch together, there to find Mrs. MacCall holding to Tess, whom she was brushing off and murmuring to in a low voice, filled with much Scotch burring.

Dot stood at the foot of the steps holding a rather crushed doll out at arm's length, for all who would to view. And stalking off over the lawn was Almira, the cat, carrying in her mouth a wee kitten. Uncle Rufus was hobbling toward the scene of the excitement as fast as his rheumatism would allow. Scattered on the ground at the foot of the steps was a collection of odds and ends —"trash" Uncle Rufus called it. The trash had come from an overturned barrel, and it was this barrel rolling down the steps and off the porch that had caused the noise.

"What happened?" demanded Ruth, breathing more easily when she saw that the casualty list was confined to the doll.

"It was Tess," declared Dot. "She tipped the barrel over and it rolled on my Alice-doll and now look at her."

Dot referred to the doll, not to her sister, though Tess was rather a sight, for she was covered with feathers from an old pillow that had been thrown into the barrel and had burst open during the progress of the accident.

At first Tess had been rather inclined to cry,

but finding, to her great relief, that she was unhurt, she changed her threatened tears into laughter and said:

"Ain't I funny looking? Just like a duck!"

"What were you trying to do, children?" asked Ruth, trying to speak rather severely in her capacity as "mother."

"I was trying to put Almira and one of her kittens into the barrel," explained Tess, now that Mrs. MacCall had got off most of the feathers. "I leaned over to put Almira in the barrel, soft and easy like, down on the other pillow, and it upset—I mean the barrel did. It began to roll, and I couldn't stop it and it rolled right off the porch and—"

"Right over my Alice-doll it rolled, and she's all squashed!" voiced Dot.

"Oh, be quiet! She isn't hurt a bit," cried Tess. "Her nose was flat, anyhow."

"Did the barrel roll over you?" asked Agnes, smiling now.

"Almost," said Tess. "But I got out of the way in time, and Almira grabbed up her kitten and ran. Where is she?" she asked.

"Never mind the cat," advised Ruth. "She's caused enough excitement for one Saturday morning. Why were you putting her in the barrel, anyhow, Tess?"

"So I'd know where she was when I came back. I wanted her and one kitten to play with if Dot is

going to play with her Alice-doll when we get back from the store. But I guess I leaned too far over."

"I guess you did," assented Ruth. "Well, I'm glad it was no worse. Is your doll much damaged, Dot?"

"Maybe I can put a little more sawdust or some rags in her and stuff her out. But she's awful flat. And look at her nose!"

"Her nose was flat, anyhow, before the barrel rolled over her," said Tess. "But I'm sorry it happened. I guess Almira was scared."

"We were all frightened," said Ruth. "It was a terrible racket. Now let the poor cat alone, and run along to the store. Oh, what a mess this is," and she looked at the refuse scattered from the trash barrel. "And just when I want things to look nice for the girls. It always seems to happen that way!"

Uncle Rufus shuffled along.

"Doan you-all worry now, honey," he said, speaking to all the girls as one. "I'll clean up dish yeah trash in no time. I done got de lawn like a billiard table, an' I'll pick up dish yeah trash. De ash man ought to have been along early dis mawnin' fo' to get it. I set it dar fo' him."

That explained the presence on the side porch of the barrel of odds and ends collected for the

ash man to remove. He had not called, and seeing the receptacle there, with an old feather pillow among the other refuse, Tess thought she had her opportunity.

"Run along now, my bonny bairns! Run along!" counseled the old Scotch woman. " 'Tis late it's getting, and the lassies will be here to lunch before we know it."

"Yes, do run along," begged Ruth. "And then come back to be washed and have your hair combed. I want you to look nice if, accidentally, you appear on the scene."

Thus bidden, and fortified with another cookie each, Tess and Dot hurried on to the store, Dot tenderly trying to pinch into shape the flattened nose of her Alice-doll.

Rufus got a broom and began to clean the scattered trash to put back into the barrel, and Mrs. MacCall hurried into her kitchen, where Linda was humming a Finnish song as she clattered amid the pots and pans.

"Oh, we must finish the parlor and library," declared Ruth. "Do come and help, Agnes."

"Coming, Ruth. Oh, here's Neale!" she added, pausing to look toward the gate through which at that moment appeared a sturdy lad of pleasant countenance.

"He acts as though he had something on his mind," went on Agnes, as the youth broke into

a run on seeing her and her sister on the steps. "Wait a moment, Ruth. He may have something to tell us."

"The fates forbid that it is anything more about Tess and Dot!" murmured Ruth, for the children had some minutes before disappeared down the street.

"News!" cried Neale O'Neil, as he swung up the steps. "I've got such news for you! Oh, it's great!" and his face fairly shone.

CHAPTER III

THE ELEVATOR

"JUST a minute now, Neale," said Ruth, in the quiet voice she sometimes had to use when Tess and Dot, either or both, were engaged in one of their many startling feats. "Quiet down a bit, please, before you tell us."

The boy had reached the porch, panting from his run, and he had been about to burst out with the news, which he could hardly contain, when Ruth addressed him.

"What's the matter? Don't you want to hear it?" he asked, fanning himself vigorously with his hat.

"Oh, yes, it isn't that," said Agnes, with a smile, which caused Neale's lips to part in an answering one, showing his white teeth that made a contrast to his tanned face. "But we have just passed through rather a strenuous time, Neale, and if you have anything more startling to tell us about Tess and Dot—"

"Oh, it isn't about them!" laughed Neale O'Neil. "They're all right. I just saw them going down the street."

"Thank goodness!" murmured Ruth. "I

thought they had got into more mischief. Well, go on, Neale, and tell us the news. Is it good?"

"The best ever," he answered, sobering down a little. "The only trouble is that there isn't very much of it. Only a sort of rumor, so to speak."

"Sit down," said Agnes, and she herself suited her action to the words. "Uncle Rufus has the spilled trash cleaned up now."

"Yes'm, it's done all cleaned up now," murmured the old colored servant as he departed, having made the side porch presentable again. "But I suah does wish dat trash man'd come 'roun' yeah befo' dem two chilluns come back. Dey's gwine to upsot dat barrel ag'in, if dey gets a chanst; dey suah is!" and he departed, shaking his head woefully enough.

"What happened?" asked Neale. "An accident?"

"You might call it that," assented Ruth, siting down beside her sister. "It was a combination of Tess, Dot, Alice-doll and Almira all rolled into one."

"That's enough!" laughed the boy, to whom readers of the previous volumes of the series need no introduction.

Neale O'Neil had once been in a circus. He was known as "Master Jakeway" and was the son of James O'Neil. Neale's uncle, William Sorber, was the ringmaster and lion tamer in the

show billed as "Twomley & Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie." Some time before the opening of the present story, Neale had left the circus and had come to Milton to live, making his home with Con Murphy, the town cobbler.

"Well, go on with your news, Neale," said Ruth gently, as she gazed solicitously at the boy. She was beginning to have more and more something of a feeling of responsibility toward him. This was due to the fact that Ruth was growing older, as has been evidenced, and also to the fact that Neale was also, and at times, she thought, he showed the lack of the care of a loving mother.

"Yes, I want to hear it," interposed Agnes. "And then we simply must get the house in shape, if the girls aren't to find us with smudges of dust on our noses."

"Is there anything I can do?" asked Neale eagerly. "Are you going to have a party?"

"Some of Ruth's young ladies are coming to lunch," explained Agnes. "I don't suppose I may be classed with them," and she looked shyly at her sister.

"I don't see why not," came the retort from the oldest Kenway girl. "I'd like to have you come to the meeting, Agnes."

"No, thank you, civics are not much in my line. I hated 'em in school. Though maybe I'll come to the eats. But let's hear Neale's news. It may spoil from being kept."

"Not much danger of that," said the boy, with another bright smile. "But are you sure there isn't anything I can do to help?"

"Perfectly sure, Neale," answered Ruth. "The two irrepressibles brought me the flowers I wanted to decorate with, and it only remains to put them in vases. But now I'm sure we have chattered enough about ourselves. Let us hear about you."

"It isn't so much about me; it's about—father," and Neale's voice sank when he said that. He spoke in almost a reverent tone. And then his face lighted up again as he exclaimed:

"I have some news about him! That's why I ran to tell you. I knew you'd be glad."

"Oh, Neale, that's fine!" cried Agnes, clasping him by the arm. "After all these years, really to have news of him! I'm so glad!"

"Is he really found?" asked Ruth, who was of a less excitable type than her sister, though she could get sufficiently worked up when there was need for it.

"No, he isn't exactly found," went on Neale. "I only wish he were. But I just heard, in a roundabout way, that he may not be so very far from here."

"That is good news," declared Ruth. "How did you hear it?"

"Well, you know my father was what is called a rover," went on the boy. "I presume I don't

need to tell you that. He wouldn't have been in the circus business with Uncle Bill, and he wouldn't have had me in the circus—along with the trick mules—unless he had loved to travel about and see the country."

"That's a safe conclusion," remarked Agnes. To her sister and herself Neale's circus experiences were an old story. He had often told them how, when a small boy, he had performed in the sawdust ring.

"Yes, father was a rover," went on Neale. "At least that's the conclusion I've come to of late. I really didn't know him very well. He left the circus when I was still small and told Uncle Bill to look after me. Well, Uncle Bill did, I'll say that for him. He was as kind as any boy's uncle could be."

"Anyhow, as you know, father left the circus, gave me in charge of Uncle Bill, and went off to seek his fortune. I suppose he realized that I would be better off out of a circus, but he knew he had to live, and money is needed for that. So that's why he quit the ring, I imagine. He's been seeking his fortune for quite a while now, and—"

"Neale, do you mean to say he has come back?" cried Agnes.

"Not exactly," was the answer. "At least if he has come back I haven't seen him. But I just met a man—a sort of tramp he is, to tell you the

truth—and he says he knew a man who saw my father in the Alaskan Klondike, where father had a mine. And this man—this tramp—says my father started back to the States some time ago."

"With a lot of gold?" asked Ruth, her eyes gleaming with hope for Neale.

"This the man didn't know. All he knew was that there was a rumor that my father had struck it fairly rich and had started back toward civilization. But even that news makes me feel good. I'm going to see if I can find him. I always had an idea, and so did Uncle Bill, that it was to Alaska father had gone, and this proves it."

"But who is this man who gave you the news, and why doesn't he know where your father can be found?" asked Ruth. "Also is there anything we can do to help you, Neale?"

"What a lot of questions!" exclaimed Agnes.

"I think I can answer them," Neale said. He was calmer now, but his face still shone and his eyes sparkled under the stress of the happy excitement. "The man, as I said, is a tramp. He asked me for some money. He was driving a team of mules on the canal towpath, and I happened to look at one of the animals. It reminded me of one we had in the circus—a trick mule—but it took only a look to show me it wasn't the same sort of kicker. I got to talking to the man, and he said he was broke—only had just taken the job and the boss wouldn't advance him a cent un-

til the end of the week. I gave him a quarter, and we got to talking. Then he told me he knew men who had been in the Klondike, and, naturally, I asked him if he had ever heard of a man named O'Neil. He said he had, and then the story came out."

"But how can you be sure it was your father?" asked Ruth, wisely not wanting false hopes to be raised.

"That was easily proved when I mentioned circus," said Neale. "This tramp, Hank Dayton, he said his name was, remembered the men speaking of my father talking about circuses, and saying that he had left me in one."

"That does seem to establish an identity," Ruth conceded. "Where is this man Dayton now, Neale?"

"He had to go on with the canal boat. But I learned from him all I could. It seems sure that my father is either back here, after some years spent in Alaska, or that he will come here soon. He must have been writing to Uncle Bill, and so have learned that I came here to live. Uncle Bill knows where I am, but I don't know where he is at this moment, though I could get in touch with him. But I'll be glad to see my father again. Oh, if I could only find him!"

Neale seemed to gaze afar off, over the fields and woods, as if he visualized his long-lost father coming toward him. His eyes had a dreamy look.

"Can't we do something to help you?" asked Ruth.

"That's what I came over about as soon as I had learned all the mule driver could tell me," went on the boy. "I thought maybe we could ask Mr. Howbridge, your guardian, how to go about finding lost persons. There are ways of advertising for people who have disappeared."

"There is," said Agnes. "I've often seen in the paper advertisements for missing persons who are wanted to enable an estate to be cleared up, and the last time I was in Mr. Howbridge's office I heard him telling one of the clerks to have such an advertisement prepared."

"Then that's what I've got to have done!" declared Neale. "I've got some money, and I can get more from Uncle Bill if I can get in touch with him. I'm going to see Mr. Howbridge and start something!"

He was about to leave the porch, to hasten away, when Ruth interposed.

"Mr. Howbridge is coming here this afternoon," said the girl. "You might stay and see him, if you like, Neale."

"What, with a whole Civic Betterment Club of girls coming to the Corner House! No, thank you," he laughed. "I'll see him afterward. But I have more hope now than I ever had before."

"I'm very glad," murmured Ruth. "Mr. Howbridge will give you any help possible, I'm sure.

Shall I speak to him about it when he comes to advise us how to form our Civic Betterment Club?"

"Oh, I think not, thank you," answered Neale. "He'll have enough to do this afternoon without taking on my affair. I can tell him later. But I couldn't wait to tell you."

"Of course you couldn't!" said Agnes. "That would have been a fine way to treat me!" Neale, who was Agnes' special chum, in a way seemed like one of the family—at least as much so as Mrs. MacCall, the housekeeper, Uncle Rufus, or Sammy Pinkney, the little fellow who lived across Willow street, on the opposite side from the Corner House.

"Well, I feel almost like another fellow now," went on Neale, as he started down the walk. "Not knowing whether your father is alive or not isn't much fun."

"I should say not!" agreed Agnes. "I wish I could ask you to stay to lunch, Neale, but—"

"Oh, gee, Aggie!" The boy laughed, and off down the street he hastened, his step light and his cheery whistle ringing out.

"Isn't it wonderful!" exclaimed Agnes, as she followed her sister into the house.

"Yes, if only it proves true," returned the older girl, more soberly.

From the kitchen came the clatter of pans and dishes as Linda disposed of the clutter incidental to making cakes and dainties for a bevy of girls.

Mrs. MacCall could be heard humming a Scotch song, and as Tess and Dot returned from the store she raised her voice in the refrain:

"Thou art a gay an' bonnie lass,
But thou hast a waukrife minnie."

"What in the world is a waukrife minnie?" demanded Agnes again, pausing in her task.

"It's 'wakeful mother,'" answered Ruth. "I remember now. It's in Burns's poem of that name. But do hurry, please, Aggie, or the girls will be here before we can change our dresses!"

"The fates forbid!" cried her sister, and she hastened to good advantage.

The lunch was over and the "Civic Betterment League" was in process of embryo formation, under the advice of Mr. Howbridge, and Ruth was earnestly presiding over the session of her girl friends in the library of the Corner House, when, from the ample yard in the rear of the old mansion, came a series of startled cries.

There was but one meaning to attach to them. The cries came from Dot and Tess, and mingled with them were the unmistakable yells of Sammy Pinkney.

At the same time Mrs. MacCall added her remonstrances to something that was going on, while Uncle Rufus, tottering his way along the hall, tapped at the door of the library and said:

" 'Scuse me, Miss Ruth, but de chilluns done got cotched in de elevator!"

"The *elevator!*" Agnes screamed. "What in the world do you mean?"

"Yas'um, dat's whut it is," said the old colored man. "Tess an' Dot done got cotched in de elevator!"

CHAPTER IV

AN AUTO RIDE

Mr. Howbridge had been making an address to Ruth's assembled girl chums when the interruption came. He had been telling them just how to go about it to organize the kind of society Ruth had in mind. In spite of her half refusal to attend the session, Agnes had decided to be present, and she was sitting near the door when Uncle Rufus made his statement about the two smallest Kenways being "cotched."

"But how can they be in an elevator?" demanded Agnes. "We haven't an elevator on the place—there hardly is one in Milton."

"I don't know no mo' 'bout it dan jest dat!" declared the old colored man. "Sammy he done say dey is cotched in de elevator an'—"

"Oh, Sammy!" cried Agnes. "If Sammy has anything to do with it you might know—"

She was interrupted by a further series of cries, unmistakably coming from Tess and Dot, and, mingled with their shouts of alarm, was the voice of Mrs. MacCall saying:

"Come along, Ruth! Oh, Agnes! Oh, the poor bairns! Oh, the wee ones!" and then she lapsed

into her broadest Scotch so that none who heard understood.

"Something must have happened!" declared Ruth.

"It is very evident," added Agnes, and the two sisters hurried out, brushing past Uncle Rufus in the hall.

"Can't we do something?" asked Lucy Poole, one of the guests.

"Yes, we must help," added Grace Watson.

"I think perhaps it will be best if you remain here," said Mr. Howbridge. "I don't imagine anything very much out of the ordinary has happened, from what I know of the family," he said with a smile. "I'll go and see, and if any more help is needed I shall let you young ladies know. Unless it is, the fewer on the scene the better, perhaps."

"Especially if any one is hurt," murmured Clo Baker. "I never could stand the sight of a child hurt."

"They don't seem to have lost their voices, at any rate," remarked Lucy. "Listen:"

As Mr. Howbridge followed Agnes and Ruth from the room, there was borne to the ears of the assembled guests a cry of:

"Let me down! Do you hear, Sammy Pinkney! Let me down!"

And a voice, undoubtedly that of the Sammy in question, answered:

"I'm not doing anything! I can't get you down! It's Billy Bumps. He did it!"

"Two boys in mischief," murmured Lucy.

"No, Billy is a goat, so I understand," said Clo. "I hope he hasn't butted one of the children down the cistern."

And while the guests were vainly wondering what had happened, Ruth, Agnes and Mr. Howbridge saw suspended in a large clothes basket, which was attached to a rope that ran over the high limb of a great oak tree in the back yard, Tess and Dot. They were in the clothes basket, Dot with her Alice-doll clasped in her hands; and both girls were looking over the side of the hamper.

Attached to the ground end of the rope, where it was run through a pulley block, was a large goat, now contentedly chewing grass, and near the animal, with a startled look on his face, was a small boy, who, when he felt like it, answered to the name Sammy Pinkney.

"Get us down! Get us down!" cried Dot and Tess in a chorus, while Mrs. MacCall stood beneath them holding out her apron as if the two little girls were ripe apples ready to fall.

"How did you get up there?" demanded Ruth, her face paling as she saw the danger of her little sisters, for Tess and Dot were too high up for safety.

"Get us down!" cried Dot and Tess in a chorus, while Mrs. MacCall stood beneath them holding out her apron.
Page 42.

"Sammy elevatored us up," explained Dot.

"Well, you wanted to go!" replied the small boy in self justification.

The goat kept on eating grass, of which there was an ample supply in the yard of the Corner House.

"What shall we do?" cried Agnes.

"Run into the house and get a strong blanket or quilt," advised Mr. Howbridge quickly, but in a quiet, insistent voice which seemed to calm the excitement of every one. "Bring the blanket here. We will hold it beneath the basket like a fire net, though I do not believe there is any immediate danger of the children falling. The rope seems to be firmly caught in the pulley block."

His quick eye had taken in this detail of the "elevator." The rope really had jammed in the block, and, as long as it held, the basket could not descend suddenly. Even if the rope should be unexpectedly loosened, there would still be the weight of the attached goat to act as a drag on the end of the cable, thus counterbalancing, in a measure, the weight of the girls in the clothes basket.

"But I don't want to take any chances," explained the lawyer. "We'll take hold and extend the blanket under them, in case they should fall."

"I have my apron ready now!" cried Mrs. MacCall. "Oh, the puir bairns! What ever possit it ye twa gang an' reesk their lives this way, ye

tapetless one?" she cried to Sammy angrily, suddenly, in her excitement, using the broadest of Scotch.

"Well, they wanted to ride in an elevator, an' I—I made one," he declared.

And that is just what he had done. Whether it was his idea or that of Tess and Dot did not then develop. What Sammy had done was to take the largest clothes basket, getting it unobserved when Mrs. MacCall and Linda were busy over Ruth's party. He had fastened the basket to a long rope, which had been thrown over the high limb of the oak tree. Then Sammy had passed the rope through a pulley block, obtained no one knew where, and had hitched to the cable the goat, Billy Bumps.

By walking away from the tree Billy had pulled on the rope. The straightaway pull was transformed, by virtue of the pulley, into an upward motion, and the basket ascended. It had formed the "elevator" to which Uncle Rufus alluded.

And, really, it did elevate Dot and Tess. They had been pulled up and had descended as Sammy made the goat back, thus releasing the pull on the rope. All had gone well for several trips until the rope jammed in the pulley, thus leaving the two girls suspended in the basket at the highest point. Their screams, the fright of Sammy, the alarms of Uncle Rufus and Mrs. MacCall had followed in quick succession.

"Here's the blanket!" cried Agnes speeding to the scene with a large woolen square under her arm. "Have they fallen yet?"

Behind her came stringing the guests. It had been impossible for them to remain in the library with their minds on civic betterment ideas when they heard what had happened.

"Well, did you ever!" cried one of the number in astonishment.

"What can it mean?" burst out a second.

"Looks to me like an amateur circus," giggled a third. She was a lighthearted girl and had not taken much of an interest in the rather dry meeting.

"Those children will be hurt," cried a nervous lady. "Oh, dear, why did they let them do such an awful thing as that?"

"I think they did it on their own account," said another lady. "Our Tommy is just like that—into mischief the minute your back is turned."

"I'm glad they came!" said Mr. Howbridge. "They may all take hold of the edges of the blanket and extend it as firemen do the life net. You may stand aside now, Mrs. MacCall, if you will," he told the Scotch housekeeper, and not until then did she lower her apron and move out from under the swaying basket, murmuring as she did so something about Sammy being a "tapetless gowk" who needed a "crummock" or a good "flyte," by which the girls understood that the

boy in question was a senseless dolt who needed a severe whipping or a good scolding.

Ruth, Agnes and the guests took hold of the heavy blanket and held it under the basket as directed by Mr. Howbridge. Then, seeing there would be litle danger to the children in case the basket should suddenly fall, the lawyer directed Sammy to loosen the goat from the rope.

"He'll run if I do," objected Sammy.

"Let him run, you ninnie!" cried Mrs. MacCall. "An' if ever ye fetchet him yon again I'll—I'll—"

But she could not call up a sufficiently severe punishment, and had to subside.

Meanwhile the mischievous boy had led Billy Bumps off to one side, by the simple process of loosening the rope from the wagon harness to which it was fastened. Mr. Howbridge then took a firm hold of the cable and, after loosening it from where it had jammed in the pulley block, he braced his feet in the earth, against the downward pull of the basket, and so gently lowered Tess and Dot to the ground.

"I'm never going to play with you again, Sammy Pinkney!" cried Tess, climbing out of the basket and shaking her finger at the boy.

"Nor me, either!" added Dot, smoothing out the rumpled dress of her Alice-doll.

"Well, you asked me to make some fun and I did," Sammy defended himself.

"Yes, and you made a lot of excitement, too," added Ruth. "You had better come into the house now, children," she went on. "And, Sammy, please take Billy away."

"Yes'm," he murmured. "But they asked me to elevator 'em up, an' I did!"

"To which I shall bear witness," said Mr. Howbridge, laughing.

Mrs. MacCall "shooed" Tess and Dot into the house, murmuring her thanks to providence over the escape, and, after a while, the excitement died away and Ruth went on with her meeting.

The Civic Betterment League was formed that afternoon and eventually, perhaps, did some good. But what this story is to concern itself with is the adventure on a houseboat of the Corner House girls. Meanwhile about a week went by. There had been no more elevator episodes, though this does not mean that Sammy did not make mischief, nor that Tess and Dot kept out of it. Far from that.

One bright afternoon, when school was out and the pre-supper appetites of Dot and Tess had been appeased, the two came running into the room where Ruth and Agnes sat.

"He's here! He's come!" gasped Tess.

"And he's got, oh, such a dandy!" echoed Dot.

"Who's here, and what has he?" asked Agnes, flying out of her chair.

"You shouldn't say anything is a 'dandy,'" corrected Ruth to her youngest sister.

"Well it is, and you told me always to tell the truth," was the retort.

"It's Mr. Howbridge and he's out in front with a—the—er the beautifulest automobile!" cried Tess. "It's all shiny an' it's got wheels, an'—an' everything! It's newer than our car."

Ruth was sufficiently interested in this news to look from the window.

"It *is* Mr. Howbridge," she murmured, as though there had been doubts on that point.

"And he must have a new auto," added Agnes.

"Oh, he has!" she cried.

A moment later they were welcoming their guardian at the door, while the smaller children formed an eager and anxious background.

"What has happened?" asked Agnes, while Ruth, remembering her position as head of the family, asked:

"Won't you come in?"

"I'd much rather you would come out, Miss Ruth," the man responded. "It is just the sort of day to be out—not in."

"Especially in such a car as that!" exclaimed Agnes. "It's a—"

"Be careful," murmured Ruth, with an admonishing glance from Agnes to the smaller girls. "Little pitchers, you know—"

"It's a wonderful car!" went on Agnes. "Is it yours?"

"Well, I sometimes doubt a little, when I recall what it cost me," her guardian answered with a laugh. "But I am supposed to be the owner, and I have come to take you for a ride."

"Oh, can't we go?" came in a chorus from Tess and Dot.

"Yes, all of you!" laughed Mr. Howbridge. "That's why I waited until school was out. They may come, may they not, Miss Ruth?" he asked. Always he was thus deferential to her when a question of family policy came up.

"Yes, I think so," was the low-voiced answer. "But we planned to have an early tea and—"

"Oh, I promise to get you back home in plenty of time," the lawyer said, with a laugh. "And after that, if you like, we might take another ride."

"How wonderful!" murmured Agnes.

"Won't you stay to tea?" asked Ruth.

"I was waiting for that!" exclaimed Mr. Howbridge. "I shall be delighted. Now then, youngsters, run out and hop in, but don't touch anything, or you may be in a worse predicament than when you were in the clothes basket elevator."

"We won't!" cried Tess and Dot, running down the walk.

"You must come back and be washed!" cried

Ruth. It was a standing order—that, and the two little girls knew better than to disobey.

But first they inspected the new car, walking all around it, and breathing in, with the odor of gasolene, the awed remarks of some neighboring children.

"That's part our car," Dot told these envious ones, as she and Tess started back toward the house. "We're going for a ride in it, and don't you dare touch anything on it or Mr. Howbridge'll be awful mad!"

"Um, oh, whut a lubly auto," murmured Alfredia Blossom, who had come on an errand to her grandfather, Uncle Rufus. "Dat's jest de beatenistest one I eber see!"

"Yes, it is nice," conceded Tess, proudly, airily and condescendingly.

A little later the two younger children and Agnes sat in the rear seat, while Ruth was beside Mr. Howbridge at the steering wheel. Then the big car purred off down the street, like a contented cat after a saucer of warm milk.

"It was very good of you to come and get us," said Ruth, when they were bowling along. "Almost the christening trip of the car, too, isn't it?" she asked.

"The very first trip I have made in it," was the answer. "I wanted it properly christened, you see. There is a method in my madness, too. I have an object in view, Martha."

Sometimes he called Ruth this, fancifully, with the thought in mind that she was "cumbered with many cares."

Again he would apply to her the nickname of "Minerva," with its suggestion of wisdom. And Ruth rather liked these fanciful appellations.

"You have an object?" she repeated.

"Yes," he answered. "As usual, I want your advice."

"As if it was really worth anything to you!" she countered.

"It will be in this case, I fancy," he went on with a smile. "I want your opinion about a canal boat."

CHAPTER V

THE HOUSEBOAT

RUTH stole a quick glance at the face of her guardian. There was a silence between them for a moment, broken only by the purr of the powerful machine and the suction of the rubber tires on the street. Agnes, Dot and Tess were having a gay time behind the two figures on the front seat.

"A canal boat?" murmured Ruth, as if she had not heard aright.

"Perhaps I had better qualify that statement," went on Mr. Howbridge in his courtroom voice, "by saying that it is, at present, Minerva, on the canal. And a boat on the canal is a canal boat, is it not? I ask for a ruling," and he laughed as he slowed down to round a corner.

"I don't know anything about your legal phraseology," answered Ruth, entering into the bantering spirit of the occasion, "but I don't see why a boat on the canal becomes a canal boat any more than a cottage pudding becomes a house. The pudding has no cottage in it any more than a club sandwich has a club in it and—"

"I am completely at your mercy," Mr. How-

bridge broke in with. "But, speaking seriously, this boat is on the canal, though strictly it is not a canal boat. You know what they are, I dare say?"

"I used to have to take Tess and Dot down to the towpath to let them watch them often enough when we first came here," said Ruth, with a laugh. "They used to think canal boats were the most wonderful objects in the world."

"Are we going on a canal boat?" asked Tess, overhearing some of the talk on the front seat. "Oh, are we?"

"Oh, I hope we are!" added Dot. "My Alice-doll just loves canal boats. And wouldn't it be splendiferous, Tess, if we could have a little one all to ourselves and Scalawag or maybe Billy Bumps to pull it instead of a mule?"

"That would be a sight on the towpath!" cried Agnes. "But what is this about canal boats, Mr. Howbridge?"

"Has some one opened a soda water store on board one?" asked Dot suddenly.

"Not exactly. You'll see, presently. But I do want your opinion," he went on, speaking directly to Ruth now, "and it has to do with a boat on a canal."

"I still think you are joking," she told him. "And except for the fact that we have a canal here in Milton I should think you were trying to fool me."

"Impossible, Minerva," he replied, soberly enough.

As Ruth had said, Milton was located on both the canal and a river, the two streams, if a canal can be called a stream, joining at a certain point, so that boats could go from one to the other. Gentory river, which acted as a feeder to one section of the canal, also connected with Lake Macopic, a large body of water. The lake contained many islands.

The automobile skirted the canal by a street running parallel to it, and then Mr. Howbridge turned down a rather narrow street, on which were situated several stores that sold supplies to the canal boats, and brought his machine to a stop on the bank of the waterway beside the towpath, as it is called from the fact that the mules or horses towing the boats walk along that level stretch of highway bordering the canal and forming part of the canal property.

At this part of the canal, the stream widened and formed a sort of harbor for boats of various kinds. It was also a refitting station; a place where a captain might secure new mules, hire helpers, buy grain for his animals and also victuals for himself and family; for the owners of the canal boats often lived aboard them. This place, known locally as "Henderson's Cove," was headquarters for all the canal boatmen of the vicinity.

"Here is where we disembark, to use a nautical

term," said Mr. Howbridge, with a smile at the younger children.

"Is this where we take the boat?" asked Dot eagerly.

"You might call it that," said Mr. Howbridge, with another genial smile. "And now, Martha, to show that I was in earnest, there is the craft in question," and he pointed to an old hulk of a canal boat, which had seen its best days.

"That! You want my opinion on *that?*" cried the girl, turning to her guardian in some surprise.

"Oh, no, the one next it. The *Bluebird.*"

Ruth changed her view, and saw a craft which brought to her lips exclamations of delight, no less than to the lips of her sisters. For it was not a "rusty canaler" they beheld, but a trim craft, a typical houseboat, with a deck covered with a green striped awning and set with willow chairs, and a cabin, the windows of which, through their draped curtains, gave hint of delights within.

"Oh, how lovely!" murmured Agnes.

"A dream!" whispered Ruth. "But why do you bring us here to show us this?" she asked with much interest.

"Because," began Mr. Howbridge, "I want to know if you would like—"

Just then an excited voice behind the little party burst out with:

"Oh, Mr. Howbridge, I've been looking every-

where for you!'' Neale O'Neil came hurrying along the towpath, seemingly much excited.

''I hope that Supreme Court decision hasn't gone against me,'' Ruth heard her guardian murmur. ''If that case is lost—''

And then Neale began to talk excitedly.

CHAPTER VI

MORE NEWS

"They told me at your office you had come here, Mr. Howbridge," said Neale. "And I hurried on as fast as I could."

"Did they send you here to find me?" asked the lawyer.

"Yes, sir."

"With any message?" As Mr. Howbridge asked this Ruth noticed that her guardian seemed very anxious about something.

"Yes, I have a message," went on Neale. "It's about—"

"The Jackson case?" interrupted the lawyer. "Is there a decision from the court and—"

"Oh, no, this isn't anything about the Jackson case or any other," Neale hastened to say. "It's about my father. And—"

Ruth and Agnes could not help gasping in surprise. As for the two smaller Kenway children all they had eyes for was the houseboat.

"Oh, your father!" repeated Mr. Howbridge. "Have you found him, Neale?" There was very evident relief in the lawyer's tone.

"No, sir, I haven't found him. But you know you told me to come to you as soon as I had found that tramp mule driver again, and he's back in town once more. He just arrived at the lower lock with a grain boat, and I hurried to tell you."

"Yes, that was right, Neale," said Mr. Howbridge. "Excuse me, Miss Ruth," he went on, turning to the girl, "but I happen to be this young man's legal adviser, and while I planned this for a pleasure trip, it seems that business can not be kept out of it."

"Oh, we don't mind!" exclaimed Ruth, with a smile at Neale. "Of course we know about this, and we'd be so glad if you could help find Mr. O'Neil."

"All right then, if the young ladies have no objection," said the lawyer, "we'll combine business with pleasure. Suppose we go aboard the *Bluebird.* I want Miss Ruth's opinion of her and—"

"I don't see why in the world you want *my* opinion about this boat," said the puzzled girl. "I'm almost sure there's a joke in it, somewhere."

"No, Martha, no joke at all, I do assure you," answered her guardian. "You'll understand presently. Now, Neale, you say this mule driver has come back?"

"Yes, sir. You know I went to you as soon as he gave me a hint that my father might have re-

turned from Alaska, and you said to keep my eyes open for this man."

"I did, Neale, yes. You of course know this story, don't you, Miss Ruth?" he asked.

"Yes, I believe we were the first Neale told about it."

"Well," went on Mr. Howbridge, while Tess and Dot showed signs of impatience to get on board the boat, "I told Neale we must find out more from this Hank Dayton, the mule driver, before we could do anything, or start to advertise for Mr. O'Neil. And now, it seems, he is here again. At first, Neale, when I saw you hurrying along, excited, I was afraid I had lost a very important law case. I am glad you did not bring bad news."

Ruth stole a glance at her guardian's face. He was more than usually quiet and anxious, she thought, though he tried to be gay and jolly.

"We'll have a look at this boat," said Mr. Howbridge, as they advanced toward it. "I'll get Minerva's opinion, and then we'll try to find Hank Dayton."

"I know where to find him," said Neale. "He's going to bunk down at the lower lock for a while. I made him promise to stay there until he could have a talk with you."

"Very good," announced the lawyer. "Now come on, youngsters!" he cried with a gayer manner, and he caught Dot up in his arms and carried

her aboard the boat, Neale, Ruth and the others following.

It was a typical houseboat. That is, it was a sort of small house built on what would otherwise have been a scow. The body of the boat was broad beamed forward and aft, as a sailor would say. That is, it was very wide, whereas most boats are pointed at the bow, and only a little less narrow at the stern.

"It's like a small-sized canal boat, isn't it?" remarked Agnes, as they went down into the cabin.

"But ever so much nicer," said Ruth.

"Oh, look at the cute little cupboards!" cried Dot. "I could keep my dolls there."

"And here's a sweet place for the cats!" added Tess, raising the cover of a sort of box in a corner. "It would be a crib."

"That's a locker," explained Mr. Howbridge, with a smile.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to lock Almira in there!" exclaimed the little girl. "She might smother, and how could she get out to play with her kittens?"

"Oh, I don't mean that it can be locked," explained the lawyer. "It is just called that on a boat. Cupboards on the wall and the window seats on the floor are generally called lockers on board a ship."

"Is this a ship?" asked Dot.

"Well, enough like one to use some of the same

words," replied Mr. Howbridge. "Now let's look through it."

This they did, and each step brought forth new delights. They had gone down a flight of steps and first entered a small cabin which was evidently intended for a living room. Back of that was very plainly the dining room, for it contained a table and some chairs and on the wall were two cupboards, or "lockers" as the lawyer said they must be called.

"And they have real dishes in them!" cried Tess, flattening her nose against one of the glass doors.

"Don't do that, dear," said Ruth in a low voice.

"But I want to see," insisted Tess.

"So do I!" chimed in Dot, and soon the two little sisters, side by side, with noses pressed flat against the doors, were taking in the sights of the dishes. Mr. Howbridge silently motioned to Ruth to let them do as they pleased.

"Oh, what a lovely dolls' party we could have here!" sighed Dot, as she turned away from the dish locker.

"And couldn't Almira come?" asked Tess, appealing to Agnes. "And bring one of her kittens?"

"Yes, we'll even allow you two kittens, for fear one would get lonesome," laughed Mr. Howbridge. "But come on. You haven't seen it all yet."

There was a small kitchen back of the dining room, and both Ruth and Agnes were interested to see how conveniently everything was arranged.

"It would be ever so much easier to get meals here than in the Corner House," was Ruth's opinion.

"Do you think so?" asked the lawyer.

"Yes, everything is so handy. You hardly have to take a step to reach anything," added Agnes. "You only have to turn from the stove to the sink, and another turn and you have everything you want, from a toasting fork to an egg beater," and she indicated the different kitchen utensils hanging in a rack over the stove.

"I'm glad you like it," said Mr. Howbridge, and Ruth found herself wondering why he said that.

They passed into the sleeping quarters where small bunks, almost like those in Pullman cars, were neatly arranged, even to a white counterpane and pillow shams on each one.

"Oh, how lovely."

"And how clean and neat!"

"It's just like a sleeping car on the railroad."

"Yes, or one of those staterooms on some steamers."

"A person could sleep as soundly here as in a bed at home," was Ruth's comment.

"Yes, unless the houseboat rocked like a ship," said Agnes.

"I don't think it could rock much on the canal."

"No, but it might on a river, or a lake. I guess a houseboat like this can go almost anywhere."

There were two sets of sleeping rooms, one on either side of a middle hall or passageway. Then came a small bathroom. And back of that was something that made Neale cry out in delight.

"Why, the boat has an engine!" exclaimed the boy. "It runs by motor!"

"Yes, the *Bluebird* is a motor houseboat," said Mr. Howbridge, with a smile. "It really belongs on Lake Macopic, but to get it there through the canal mules will have to be used, as this boat has such a big propeller that it would wash away the canal banks. It is not allowed to move it through the canal under its own power."

"That's a dandy engine all right!" exclaimed Neale, and he knew something about them for one summer he had operated a small motor craft on the Gentory River, as well as running the Corner House girls' automobile for them. "I wish I could run this," he went on with a sigh, "but I don't suppose there's any chance."

"I don't know about that," said the lawyer, musingly. "That is what I brought Minerva here to talk about. Let's go back to the main cabin and sit down."

"I'm going to sit on one of the lockers!" cried Tess, darting off ahead of the others.

"I want to sit on it, too!" exclaimed Dot.

"There are two lockers on the floor—one for each," laughed Mr. Howbridge.

As the little party moved into the main cabin, Ruth found herself wondering more and more what Mr. Howbridge wanted her opinion on. She was not long, however, in learning.

"Here is the situation," began the lawyer, when they were all seated facing him. His tone reminded Ruth of the time he had come to talk to them about their inheritance of the Corner House. "This boat, the *Bluebird,* belongs to an estate. The estate is being settled up, and the boat is going to be sold. A man living at the upper end of Lake Macopic has offered to buy it at a fair price if it is delivered to him in good condition before the end of summer. As the legal adviser of the estate I have undertaken to get this boat to the purchaser. And what I brought you here for, to-day, Minerva," he said, smiling at Ruth, "is to ask your opinion about the best way of getting the boat there."

"Do you really mean that?" asked the girl.

"I certainly do."

"Well, I should say the best plan would be to start it going, and steer it up the canal to the river, through the river into the lake and up the lake to the place where it is to be delivered," Ruth answered, smiling.

"But Mr. Howbridge said the boat couldn't be

moved by the motor on the canal," objected Agnes.

"Well, have mules tow it, then," advised Ruth. "That is very simple."

"I am glad you think so," replied the lawyer. "And the next matter on which I wish your advice is whether to start the boat off alone on her trip, or just in charge of, say, the mule driver."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to trust a lovely houseboat like this to only a mule driver!" exclaimed Ruth.

"That's what I thought," went on her guardian, with another smile. "It needs some one on board to look after it, doesn't it?"

"Well, yes, I should say so."

"Then how would you like to take charge?" came the unexpected question.

"Me?" cried Ruth. *"Me?"*

"You, and all of you!" went on the lawyer. "Listen. Here is the situation. I have to send this houseboat to Lake Macopic. You dwellers of the Corner House need a vacation. You always have one every summer, and I generally advise you where to go. At least you always ask me, and sometimes you take my advice.

"This time I advise you to take a houseboat trip. And I make this offer. I will provide the boat and all the needful food and supplies, such as gasolene and oil when you reach the river and lake. Everything else is on board, from beds to dishes.

I will also hire a mule driver and engage some mules for the canal trip. Now, how does that suit you?"

"Oh! Oh!" exclaimed Agnes, and it seemed to be all she could say for a moment. She just looked at Mr. Howbridge with parted lips and sparkling eyes.

"How wonderful!" murmured Ruth.

"Can we go?" cried Tess.

"The whole family, including Neale," said Mr. Howbridge.

"Oo-ee!" gasped Dot, wide-eyed.

Agnes and Neale stared entranced at each other, Agnes, for once, speechless.

"Well, now I have made the offer, think it over, and while you are doing that I'll give a little attention to Neale's case," went on Mr. Howbridge. "Now, young man, suppose we go and find this mule driver who seems to know something of your father."

"Oh, wait! Don't go away just yet!" begged Ruth. "Let's talk about the trip some more! Do you really think we can go?"

"I want you to go. It would be doing me a favor," said the lawyer. "I must get this boat to Lake Macopic somehow, and I don't know a better way than to have Martha and her family take it," and he bowed formally to his ward.

"And did you really mean I may go, too?" asked Neale.

"If you can arrange it, and Miss Ruth agrees."

"Of course I will! But, oh, there will be such a lot to do to get ready. We'd have to take Mrs. MacCall along, too," she added.

"Of course," assented Mr. Howbridge. "By all means!"

"And would you go too?" asked Ruth.

"Would you like me to?" the lawyer countered.

"Of course. We'd all like it."

"I might manage to make at least part of the trip," was the reply. "Then you have decided to take my offer?"

"Oh, I think it's perfectly *wonderful!*" burst out Agnes.

As for Tess and Dot, it could be told what they thought by just looking at them.

"Very well then," said the guardian, "we'll consider it settled. I'll have to see about mules and a driver for the canal part of the trip and—"

An exclamation from Neale interrupted him.

"What is it?" asked the lawyer.

"Why couldn't we hire Hank Dayton for a mule driver?" Neale asked. "He's rough, but I think he's a decent man and honest, and he knows a lot about the canal and boats and mules."

"It might not be a bad idea," assented Mr. Howbridge. "We'll find him and ask him, Neale. And it would be killing two birds with one stone. He could help you in your search for your father. Yes, I think that will be a good plan. Girls, I'll

leave you here to look over the *Bluebird* at your leisure while Neale and I go to interview the mule driver.''

''And I hope he will be able to tell you how to find your father, Neale,'' said Agnes, in a low voice.

''I hope so, too,'' added the boy. ''You don't know, Aggie, how much I've wanted to find father.''

''Of course I do, Neale. And you'll find him, too!''

Neale went on with Mr. Howbridge, somewhat cheered by Agnes' sympathy.

CHAPTER VII

MAKING PLANS

LEFT to themselves on the *Bluebird,* Ruth, Agnes, Dot and Tess went over every part of it again, from the engine room to the complete kitchen and living apartments.

"Neale will just love fussing around that motor," said Agnes.

"You speak as if we had already decided to make the trip," remarked Ruth, with a bright glance at her sister.

"Why, yes, haven't you?" Agnes countered. "I thought you and Mr. Howbridge had fixed it up between you when you were chatting up on the front seat of the auto."

"He never said a word to me about it," declared Ruth.

"He must have said something," insisted her sister.

"Oh, of course we talked, but not about *this,"* and Ruth swept her hands about to indicate the *Bluebird.* "I was as much surprised as you to have him ask us if we would take her up to the lake."

"Well, it will be delightful, don't you think?"

"Yes, I think it will. But of course it depends on Mrs. MacCall."

"I don't see why!" exclaimed Agnes quickly and reproachfully.

"Of course you do. She'll have to go along to act as chaperone and all that. We may have to tie up at night in lonely places along the canal or river and—"

"We'll have Neale and Mr. Howbridge! And how about asking Luke Shepard and his sister Cecile?" went on Agnes.

Ruth flushed a little.

"I don't believe Cecile and Luke can go," she replied slowly. "Cecile has got to go home to take care of her Aunt Lorena, who is sick, and Luke wrote me that he had a position offered to him as a clerk in a summer hotel down on the coast, and it is to pay so well that he would not dream of letting the opportunity pass."

"Oh, that's too bad, Ruth. You won't see much of him."

"I am not sure I'll see anything of him." And Ruth's face clouded a little.

"Well, anyway, as I said before, we'll have Neale and Mr. Howbridge," continued Agnes.

"Neale. But Mr. Howbridge is not sure he can go—at least all the way. However, we'll ask Mrs. MacCall."

"I think she'll be just crazy to go!" declared

Agnes. "Come on, let's go right away and find out."

"But we must wait for Mr. Howbridge to come back. He told us to."

"Well, then we'll say we're already living on board," said Agnes. "Oh, won't it be fun to eat on a houseboat!" and she danced off to the dining room, took her seat at the table, and exclaimed: "I'll have a steak, rare, with French fried potatoes, plenty of gravy and a cup of tea and don't forget the pie *à la mode.*"

Tess and Dot laughed and Ruth smiled. They then went all over the boat again, with the result that they grew more and more enthusiastic about the trip. And when Mr. Howbridge and Neale came back in the automobile a little later, beaming faces met them.

"Well, what about it, Minerva?" Mr. Howbridge asked Ruth. "Are you going to act as caretakers for the boat to help me settle the estate?"

"Since you put it that way, as a favor, I can not refuse," she answered, giving him a swift smile. "But, as I told the girls, it will depend on Mrs. MacCall."

"You leave her to me," laughed the lawyer. "I'll recite one of Bobby Burns's poems, and if that doesn't win her over nothing will. Neale, do you think you can manage that motor?"

"I'm sure of it," said the boy. "It isn't the

same kind I had to run before, but I can get the hang of it all right."

"Is there any news about your father?" asked Ruth, glancing from her guardian to the boy.

"Nothing very definite," answered the lawyer. "We found Hank Dayton, and in spite of his rough and ragged clothes I discovered him to be a reliable fellow. He told us all he knew about the rumor of Mr. O'Neil having returned from the Klondike, and I am going to start an inquiry, with newspaper advertising and all that. And I may as well tell you that I have engaged this same Hank Dayton to drive the mules that will draw the *Bluebird* on the canal part of the trip."

"Oh!" exclaimed Agnes. "I thought Neale said this man was a tramp!"

"He is, in appearance," said Mr. Howbridge, with a smile. "A person can not wear an evening suit and drive canal mules. But Hank seems to be a sterling chap at the bottom, and with Neale and Mrs. MacCall to keep him straight, you will have no trouble.

"It is really necessary," he went on, "to have some man who understands the canal, the mules, and the locks to look after the boat, and I think this Dayton will answer. He has just finished a trip, and so Neale and I hired him. It will be well for Neale to keep in touch with him, too, for through Hank we may get more news of Mr.

O'Neil. And now, if you have sufficiently looked over the *Bluebird,* we may as well go back."

"It would be a good while before I could see enough of her!" exclaimed Agnes. "I'm just in love with the craft, and I know we shall have a delightful summer on her. Only the trip will be over too soon, I'm afraid."

"There is no necessity for haste," the lawyer assured her. "The purchaser of the boat does not want her until fall, and you may linger as long as you like on the trip."

"Good!" exclaimed Agnes.

A family council was held the next day at which Mr. Howbridge laid all the facts before Mrs. MacCall. At first the Scotch housekeeper would not listen to any proposal for the trip on the water. But when Ruth and Agnes had spoken of the delights of the boat, and when the housekeeper had personally inspected the *Bluebird,* she changed her mind.

"Though I never thought, in my old age, I'd come to bein' a houseboat keeper," she chuckled. "But 'tis all in the day's work. I'll gang with ye ma lassies. A canal boat is certainly more staid than an ice-boat, and I went alang with ye on that."

"Hurray!" cried Agnes, unable to restrain her joy. "All aboard for Lake Macopic!"

The door opened and Aunt Sarah Maltby came in.

"I thought I heard some one calling," she said anxiously.

"It was Agnes," explained Ruth. "She's so excited about the trip."

"Fish? What fish? It isn't Friday, is it?" asked the old lady, who was getting rather deaf.

"No, Auntie dear, I didn't say *fish*—I said *trip*." And Ruth spoke more loudly. "We are going to make a trip on a houseboat for our summer vacation. Would you like to come along?"

Aunt Sarah Maltby shook her head, as Tess pulled out a chair for her.

"I'm getting too old, my dear, to go traipsing off over the country in one of those flying machines."

"It's a houseboat—not a flying machine," Agnes explained.

"Well, it's about the same, I reckon," returned the old lady. "No, I'll stay at home and look after things at the Corner House. It'll need somebody."

"Yes, there's no doubt of that," Ruth said.

So it was arranged. Aunt Sarah Maltby would stay at home with Linda and Uncle Rufus, while Mrs. MacCall accompanied the Corner House girls on the houseboat.

There was much to be done before the trip could be undertaken, and many business details to arrange, for, as inheritors of the Stower estate, Ruth and her sisters received rents from a number of

tenants, some of them in not very good circumstances.

"And we must see that they will want nothing while we are gone," Ruth had said.

It was part of her self-imposed duties to play Lady Bountiful to some of the poorer persons who rented Uncle Peter Stower's tenements.

"Well, as long as you don't go to buying 'dangly jet eawin's' for Olga Pederman it will be all right," said Agnes, and they laughed at this remembrance of the girl who, when ill with diphtheria, had asked for these ornaments when Ruth called to see what she most wanted.

Eventually all the many details were arranged and taken care of. A mechanic had gone over the motor of the *Bluebird* and pronounced it in perfect running order, a fact which Neale verified for himself. He had made all his plans for going on the trip, and between that and eagerly waiting for any news of his missing father, his days were busy ones.

Mr. Howbridge had closely questioned Hank Dayton and had learned all that rover could tell, which was not much. But it seemed certain that Mr. O'Neil had started from Alaska for the States.

That he had not, even on his arrival, written to Neale, was probably due to the fact that the man did not know where his son was. His Uncle Bill Sorber, of course, knew Neale's address, but the

trouble was that the circus, which was not a very large affair, traveled about so, on no well-kept scheduled route, that Mr. Sorber was difficult to find. Letters had been addressed to him at several places where it was thought his show might be, but, so far, no answer had been received. He was asked to send a message to Mr. Howbridge as soon as any word came from Mr. O'Neil.

To Hank Dayton was left the task of picking out some mules to tow the houseboat through the stretch of canal. About a week, or perhaps longer, would be consumed on this trip, as there was no hurry.

Where the voyage is kept up for any length of time, two sets of mules or horses are used in towing canal boats. When one team is wearied it is put in the stable, which is on board the canal boat, and the other team is led out over a bridge, or gangplank, specially made for the purpose, on to the towpath.

But on the *Bluebird* there were no provisions for the animals, so it was planned to buy only one team of mules, drive the animals at a leisurely pace through the day and let them rest at night either in the open, along the canal towpath, or in some of the canal barns that would be come upon on the trip. At the end of the trip the animals would be sold. Mr. Howbridge had decided that this was the best plan to follow, though there was a towing company operating on the canal for such

boat owners as did not possess their own animals.

As Mr. Howbridge had shrewdly guessed, the rough clothes of Hank Dayton held a fairly good man. He had been in poor luck, but he was not dissipated, and even Mrs. MacCall approved of him when he had been shaved, a shave being something he had lacked when Neale first saw him. Then, indeed, he had looked like a veritable tramp.

Gradually all that was to be done was accomplished, and the day came when Ruth and Agnes could say:

"To-morrow we start on our wonderful trip. Oh, I'm so happy!"

"What about your Civic Betterment Club?" asked Agnes of her sister.

"That will have to keep until I come back. Really no one wants to undertake any municipal reforms in the summer."

"Oh, my! The political airs we put on!" laughed Agnes. "Well, I'm glad you are going to have a good time. You need it."

"Yes, I think the change will be good for all of us," murmured Ruth. "Tess and Dot seem delighted, and—"

She stopped suddenly, for from the floor above came a cry of alarm followed by one of distress.

"What's that?" gasped Ruth.

"Dot or Tess, I should say," was the opinion of Agnes. "They must have started in to get some of their change already. Oh, gee!"

"Agnes!" Ruth took time to protest, for she very much objected to Agnes' slang.

A moment later Dot came bursting into the room, crying:

"Oh, she's in! She's in! And it isn't holding her up at all! Come on, quick. Both of you! Tess is in!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE ROBBERY

Dot Kenway stood in the middle of the room, dancing up and down, fluttering her hands and crying over and over again:

"She's in! She's in! And it isn't holding her up! Oh, come quick!"

With a bound Ruth was at her sister's side. She grasped Dot by the arm and held her still.

"Be quiet, honey, and tell me what the matter is," Ruth demanded.

"Oh, she's in! She's in! And it isn't holding her up!" Dot repeated.

"We'd better go and see what it is," suggested Agnes. "Tess may merely have fallen out of bed."

"Fallen out of bed—this time of day?" cried Ruth. "Impossible!"

But she let go of Dot and sped up the stairs whence floated down a series of startled cries. Agnes followed, while Dot called after them:

"Look in the bathroom! She's in! It isn't holding her up!"

To the bathroom rushed Ruth and Agnes, there

to behold a sight which first made them gasp and then, instantly, started them into energetic action. For Tess was floundering about in the tub, full of water, with part of her bathing suit on and something bulky tied around her waist. She was clinging to the edge of the tub with both hands and trying to get to her feet. The tub was filled with water, and much of it was splashing over the side. Fortunately the floor of the bathroom was tiled.

"Oh, Tess! what are you doing?" cried Agnes, as she and Ruth pulled the small girl to her feet. Tess was gasping for breath, and had evidently swallowed some water.

"I—I—er—gug—I—was—" That was all Tess could say for a while.

"You poor child!" exclaimed Ruth, reaching for a towel to dry the dripping face. "Did you fall in? And what possessed you to put on your bathing suit?"

"And what *have* you got around your waist?" cried Agnes.

"That—that—that's my—my *life preserver!*" exploded Tess. "If—if you'll take the towel out of my moo-oo-oo-uth I'll t-t-tell—you!" she stammered.

"Yes, do let's let her tell, for mercy's sake!" exclaimed Ruth. "Did your head go under, Tessie, dear?"

Tess nodded. It was easier than speaking, es-

pecially as she had not yet quite got her breath back.

The two older sisters dried her partly on the towel, the little girl raising her hands to keep her sisters from stuffing any more of the Turkish towel into her mouth, and then Dot came up the stairs.

"Is she—is she drowned?" was the awed whisper.

"No, but she might have been," answered Ruth. "What were you two doing? This is worse than the clothes basket elevator. What were you doing?"

"I was making a life preserver," volunteered Tess, when she had been helped out of the bath-tub and was standing on a big mat that absorbed the little rivulets of water streaming from her.

"A life preserver?" questioned Agnes.

"Yes," Tess nodded. "I thought maybe I might fall off the houseboat and I didn't see any life preservers on it, so I made one."

"Out of the hot water bag," put in Dot. "She tied it around her waist and she wanted me to tie one on me and make believe we fell into the bath-tub. But I wouldn't, and she got in, and it didn't hold her up."

"I should say it didn't!" cried Agnes. "How could you expect a rubber bag full of water to hold you up? It couldn't hold itself up."

"It wasn't full of water. I blew it up full of

air just as Sammy Pinkney blows up his football," said Tess. "And that floats in water, 'cause I saw it."

"A hot water bag is different," returned Ruth. "Yes, she has one on," she added, as she and Agnes unwrapped from their sister some folds of cloth by which the partly inflated hot-water bag had been fastened around Tess's waist.

"Don't you ever do anything like that again!" scolded Dot, as Tess was sent to her room to dress while Linda came up to mop the floor.

"Well, what am I to do if I fall overboard off the *Bluebird,* I'm asking you?" called Tess, turning back, and holding her bath robe around her slim form. "There aren't any life preservers on it!"

"We will provide some if they are needed," said Ruth, laughing.

Just then Aunt Sarah Maltby came in and heard the story from Agnes.

"Just think, Dot and Tess, one of you might have been drowned," she said severely. "If that bag had got around your feet, and the winding strips had tangled, your feet might have been held up and your head down. You might easily have been drowned in the bathtub."

"Not me—I wouldn't!" declared Dot.

"Why not?" Agnes wanted to know.

" 'Cause I wouldn't get in it! I told Tess maybe it was dangerous."

"Well, it wouldn't have been if I'd had more air in the bag," called Tess from the half-open door of her room. "That was the matter."

Mrs. MacCall shook her head when she heard what had happened.

"I ha me doots about them on the boat," she said. "If they cut up such didoes here, what'll they do then?"

"Oh, I think we shall manage somehow," said Ruth with cheerful philosophy. "We're used to mishaps."

By dint of hard work the final preparations for the houseboat trip were made. The *Bluebird* was got in shape for the first part of the trip through the canal. Hank Dayton had been "slicked up," and had his two sturdy mules in readiness. Neale had tested the motor again. A supply of food had been put on board, together with gasolene to use as soon as the transition from the canal to the river should have taken place.

Mr. Howbridge had arranged his plans so as to start with the girls, and Mrs. MacCall had her small trunk packed and in readiness. All that was possible had been done to get into communication with Neale's father, and all that could be done was to await word from him, or from Mr. Sorber, who might be the first to hear that the missing Klondike explorer had returned.

And at last the morning of the start arrived.

"Oh, it's going to rain!" cried Tess as she arose early and ran to the window to look out.

"I don't care. We can take umbrellas, and the boat has a roof on it," said Dot. "My Alice-doll has been wet before."

"But Almira doesn't like rain, and her kittens might get cold," objected Tess.

"We can't take Almira!" said Ruth in a voice that Tess knew it was useless to appeal from. "The poor cat wouldn't have a good time, Tessie, and she'd be in the way with her kittens."

"She could catch mice," suggested Tess, as a sort of last hope.

"There are mice on canal boats. I heard Hank Dayton say so," put in Dot, seeking to strengthen Tess's position.

"We'll get a cat later if we need it," compromised Ruth. "Don't think of bringing Almira."

"All right!" assented Dot, and then Tess called:

"There's Sammy, and he's got Billy Bumps. Let's go down and tell them good-by!"

"Can't Sammy come with us?" asked Dot, turning to Ruth.

"No indeed, nor the goat either! So don't ask him and make him feel bad when I have to refuse him."

"All right," sighed Dot.

Then she and Tess finished dressing and went

out to greet Sammy, who was paying one of his early morning calls.

"Want me to do any errands for you, Ruth?" he politely asked when he had refused an invitation to breakfast, saying he had already eaten.

"No, thank you, Sammy," was the answer.

"I could go quick—hitch Billy to the wagon and get anything you wanted from the village," he went on.

Ruth shook her head, and then had to hurry away to see about one of the many last-minute details.

"Well, good-by, then," said Sammy to the other sisters, as he prepared to depart. "I wish I was going! We could take Billy Bumps."

"But if they wouldn't let me take a cat on the boat I don't suppose they'd want a goat," put in Tess.

"I don't guess so," said Sammy, more meekly than he usually spoke. "Well, good-by!" And down the street he went, taking Billy Bumps, who belonged to Tess and Dot, with him.

"It does look like rain," said Agnes, when it was almost time for Mr. Howbridge to call for them in his machine to take them and their baggage to the houseboat.

"It may hold off until we get on board," said Ruth. She gave a sudden start. "Oh, Agnes! Our jewelry! We forgot to take it to the bank!"

"That's so! I knew we'd forget something! Well, haven't we time to run down with it now before Mr. Howbridge comes?"

Ruth looked at her wrist watch.

"Just about," was her decision. "Come on. You and I can take the package down and then hurry back."

"You'd best take an umbrella, ma dearies!" cautioned Mrs. MacCall. " 'Tis showery goin' to be this day!"

"We'll take one," assented Ruth.

She and Agnes had planned to leave their jewelry and some other articles of value in their safe deposit box, but had forgotten it until now.

The two older girls sallied forth with a large umbrella, which Agnes carried, while Ruth had the package of jewelry.

They were half way to the bank, no great distance from home, when suddenly a downpour began with the usual quickness of a summer shower.

"Hurry! Raise the umbrella!" cried Ruth. "I'm getting drenched!"

"Isn't it terrible!" gasped Agnes.

She and her sister stepped into the shelter of the nearest doorway for a moment. Something was wrong with the catch of the umbrella. Ruth was just going to help her sister raise it when suddenly two rough-looking men rushed from the hall back of the doorway in which the girls had taken shelter.

One of the men rudely brushed past Ruth, and, as he did so, he made a grab for the packet of jewelry, snatching it from her.

"Oh!" screamed the girl. "Stop! Oh! Oh, Agnes!"

The other man turned and pushed Agnes back as she leaned forward to help Ruth.

Then, as the rain came down harder than ever, the men sped up the street, leaving the two horror-stricken girls breathless in the doorway.

CHAPTER IX

ALL ABOARD

For a moment after the robbery neither Ruth nor Agnes felt capable of saying anything or doing anything. Ruth, it is true, had cried out as the burly ruffian had snatched the packet of jewelry from her, and then fear seemed to paralyze her. But this was only for a moment. In few seconds both she and Agnes became their energetic selves, as befitted the characters of Corner House girls.

"Oh, Agnes! did you see? He has the jewelry!" cried Ruth.

"Yes, I saw! He pushed me back or I'd have grabbed it away again! We must take after them!"

The girls started to leave, having managed to get the umbrella up, but at that instant there came such a fierce blast of wind and such a blinding downpour of rain that they were fairly forced back into the doorway.

And, more than this, their umbrella was turned inside out and sent flapping in their faces by the erratic wind, so that they could not see what they were doing.

"This is awful!" exclaimed Agnes, and she was near to crying.

"We must call for help," said Ruth, but they would have needed to shout very loud indeed to be heard above the racket made by the wind and rain. A momentary glimpse up and down the street, when a view of it could be had amid the sheets of rain, showed no one in sight.

"What shall we do?" cried Ruth, vainly trying to get the umbrella to its proper shape.

At that moment the door behind them opened. The girls turned, fearing a further attack, but they saw Myra Stetson, whose father kept a grocery, and it was in the doorway adjoining the store that the Corner House girls had taken refuge.

"What is the matter?" asked Myra, when she saw who it was. "I heard the door blow open and I came down to shut it."

The Stetson family lived up over the grocery, where there were two flats.

"What has happened?" went on the grocer's daughter. She was rather more friendly with Agnes than with Ruth, but knew both sisters, and, indeed, Ruth was planning to have Myra on one of the Civic Betterment committees. There had been some little differences of opinion between Myra and Agnes, but these had been smoothed out and the girls were now good friends.

"We've been robbed! At least Ruth has!" ex-

claimed Agnes. "A ruffian took our jewelry box!"

"You don't mean it!" cried Myra.

"I only wish I didn't," said Ruth brokenly. "Oh, my lovely rings!"

"And my pins!" added Agnes.

"Tell me about it," begged Myra, and, rather breathlessly, the Corner House girls told the story of the assault of the two burly men in the doorway.

"They ran off down the street with the box of jewelry we were taking to the bank," explained Ruth.

"Then you'd better tell the police at once," advised Myra. "Come on up into our flat and you can telephone from there. Mr. Buckley is a special officer and he has a telephone. Father will send for him. Do come up!"

"Yes, I think we had better," agreed Ruth. "And we must notify Mr. Howbridge. That is, if he hasn't left his office."

"If he has we can get him at our house," said Agnes. "We were just going to start on a houseboat trip when this terrible thing happened," she explained to Myra.

"Isn't it too bad!" said the grocer's daughter. "But do come upstairs. Did you say the man came out of our hallway?"

"Yes," answered Ruth. "We stepped into the doorway to be out of the rain for a moment and

to raise the umbrella, the catch of which had been caught in some way, when they both rushed past us, one of them grabbing the box from under my arm."

"And one gave me a shove," added Agnes.

"That's the most amazing thing I ever heard of!" declared Myra. "Those men must have been hiding in there waiting for you."

"But how did they know we were coming?" asked Ruth. "We didn't think of going to the bank with the jewelry ourselves until a few minutes ago. Those men couldn't have known about it."

"Then it's very strange," said Myra. "I must tell father about it. There may be more of them hiding upstairs."

"Do you mean in your house?" asked Agnes, for they were now ascending the stairs, the refractory umbrella having at last been subdued and turned right side out.

"I mean in the vacant flat above ours," went on Myra. "It's to let, you know, and two men were in to look at it yesterday. They said they were from the Klondike."

"From the Klondike!" exclaimed Ruth, and she and Agnes exchanged significant glances.

"Yes. That's in Alaska where they dig gold, you know," explained Myra. "I didn't see the men. Father said they came to look at the flat, and one of them remarked they had just come back

from the gold regions. They didn't rent it though, as far as I know."

"Isn't that strange?" said Agnes slowly.

"Very," agreed Ruth, and, by a look, she warned her sister not to say any more just then.

They were ushered into the Stetson living apartment over the store and Mr. and Mrs. Stetson were soon listening to the story.

"The idea of any men daring to use our hallway to commit a robbery!" cried Mrs. Stetson. "Father, you'd better see if any more of the villians are hiding. I'm sure I'll not sleep a wink this night."

"I'll take a look," said the grocer. "That hall door often blows open, though. The lock needs fixing. It would be easy for any one to slip into the lower hall from the street and wait there."

"That's what they probably did," said Agnes. "And it was just by accident that we went up to the doorway to raise the umbrella. The men must have seen us, and, though they couldn't have known what was in the box, they took it anyhow. Oh, it's too bad! Our trip is spoiled now!" and she was on the verge of tears.

"Don't worry, my dear," advised Mrs. Stetson. "We'll get the police after them. Father, you must telephone at once. And you must have a look in those vacant rooms upstairs."

"I will," promised the grocer, and then began a period of activity. A clerk and a porter from

the grocery downstairs made a careful examination of the upper premises, but, of course, discovered no more thieves. And, naturally, there were no traces of the men who had robbed Ruth and Agnes.

The telephone soon put the police authorities of Milton in possession of the facts, and Special Officer Buckley, was soon "on the job," as he expressed it. He came, a burly figure in rubber boots and a glistening rubber coat, to the Stetson apartment, there to hear the story first hand from Ruth and Agnes. With him also came Jimmy Dale, a reporter from the Milton *Morning Post.*

Jimmy had been at the police headquarters when word of the robbery was telephoned in, and he, too, "got on the job."

All the description Ruth and Agnes could give of the men was that they were rough and burly and not very well dressed. But it had all taken place so quickly and in such obscurity amid the mist of the rain that it was difficult for either girl to be accurate.

Then as much as was possible was done. Several other special officers were notified of the occurrence, and the regular police force of Milton, no very large aggregation, was instructed to "pick up" any suspicious characters about town.

Mr. Stetson confirmed the statement made by Myra that two men who claimed to have recently returned from the Klondike had been to look at

the vacant flat the day before. In appearance they were rather rough, the grocer said, though he would not call them tramps by any means.

There might be a possible connection between the two, it was agreed. Mr. Howbridge was notified by telephone, and called in his automobile for the two girls, who, after some tea, felt a little more composed.

"But, oh my lovely jewelry!" exclaimed Agnes. "It's gone!"

"And mine," added Ruth. "There were some things of Dot's and Tessie's in the box, too, and mother's wedding ring," and Ruth sighed.

"The police may recover it," said the lawyer. "I am glad neither of you was harmed," and his gaze rested anxiously on his wards.

"No, they barely touched me," said the older girl. "One of them just grabbed the box and ran."

"The other one gave me a shove," declared Agnes. "If I had known what he was up to he wouldn't have got away so easily. I haven't been playing basket ball for nothing!" she boasted.

"Well, I think there is nothing more to be done," said their guardian. "While there is no great rush, I think the sooner we get started on our houseboat trip the better. So if you'll come with me, I'll take you home, we can gather up the last of the baggage and make a quick trip

to the *Bluebird*. I have the side curtains up and the rain is stopping, I think."

"Oh, are we going on the trip—*now*—after the robbery?" asked Ruth doubtfully.

"Yes. Why not?" inquired the lawyer, with a smile. "You can do nothing by staying here, and if the men should be arrested I can arrange to bring you back to identify them. I know how bad you feel, but the trip will be the best thing in the world for you, for it will take your mind from your loss."

"Yes, Ruth, it will!" agreed Agnes, for she saw that her sister was much affected.

"Well, we'll go back home, anyhow," assented Ruth. And after they had thanked the Stetson's for their hospitality the two sisters left in charge of Mr. Howbridge. As he had said, the rain was stopping, and when they reached the Corner House the sun was out again, glistening on the green leaves of the trees.

"It's a good omen," declared Agnes.

Of course there was consternation at the Corner House when the story of the robbery was told. But even Aunt Sarah Maltby agreed with Mr. Howbridge that it would do Ruth and Agnes good to make the houseboat trip. Accordingly, after the two robbed ones had calmed down a little more, the last belongings were gathered together, Dot and Tess, who had considerably mussed their clothes playing tag around the furniture, were

straightened out, good-bys were said over and over again, and then, in Mr. Howbridge's automobile, the little party started for the *Bluebird.*

"Where's Neale?" asked Agnes, as they neared the canal.

"He'll meet us at the boat," said the lawyer. "I just received a letter from his uncle, the circus man, which contains a little information about the boy's father."

"Has he really returned from the Klondike?" asked Ruth.

"I believe he has. But whether he has money or is as poor as when he started off to seek his fortune, I don't know. Time will tell. But I am glad the sun is out. It would have been rather gloomy to start in the rain."

"If it had not rained those men never would have gotten our jewel box!" declared Agnes. "It was only because we were confused by the umbrella in the hard shower that they dared take it."

"Don't think about it!" advised Mr. Howbridge.

They reached the *Bluebird,* to find Neale waiting for them with smiling face.

"I only wish we could start under gasolene instead of mule power!" he cried gayly.

"Time enough for that!" said Mr. Howbridge, with a smile. "Is Hank on hand?"

"He's bringing out the hee-haws now," said

Neale, pointing down the towpath, while Dot and Tess laughed at his descriptive name for the mules.

The driver was leading them from the stable where they had taken shelter from the downpour, and they were soon hitched to the long towing rope.

"It 'minds me of the time I came from Scotland," murmured Mrs. MacCall as she went up the "bridge," as the gangplank of a canal boat is sometimes called.

"All aboard!" cried Neale, and they took their places on the *Bluebird*. Mr. Howbridge had arranged for one of his men to come and drive back the automobile, and there was nothing further to be looked after.

"Shall I start?" called Hank, from his station near the mules, after he had helped Neale haul up the gangplank which had connected the houseboat with the towpath.

"Give 'em gas!" shouted the boy through his hands held in trumpet fashion.

The animals leaned forward in their collars, the rope tauted, pulling with a swishing sound up from the water into which it had dropped. The *Bluebird* began slowly to move, and at last they were on their way.

Ruth, Agnes and the others remained on deck for a while, and then the older folk, including Neale, went below to get things "shipshape and

Bristol fashion." Dot and Tess remained on deck under the awning.

"Don't fall overboard!" cautioned Mrs. MacCall to the small sisters.

"We won't!" they promised.

It was about ten minutes later, during which time the *Bluebird* was progressing slowly through the quiet waters of the canal, that Agnes heard shouts on deck.

"Hark!" she exclaimed, for they were all moving about, getting matters to rights in the cabins.

"What is it?" asked Ruth.

"I thought I heard Tess calling," went on Agnes.

There was no mistake about it. Down the stairway that led from the upper deck to the cabin came the cry of:

"Oh, come here! Come here quick! One of the mules is acting awful funny! I think he's trying to kick Mr. Hank into the canal!"

CHAPTER X

A STOWAWAY

RUTH dropped some of the garments she was unpacking from her trunk. Agnes came from the dining room, where she was setting the table for the first meal on the craft. Neale and Mr. Howbridge ran from the motor compartment in the lower hold of the boat. Mrs. MacCall raised her hands and began to murmur in her broadest Scotch so that no one knew what she was saying. And from the upper deck of the boat, where they had been left sitting on camp stools under the green striped awning, came the chorused cries of Tess and Dot:

"Oh, come on up! Come on up!"

"Something must have happened!" exclaimed Ruth.

"But the girls are all right, thank goodness!" added Agnes.

Together all four of them, with Mrs. MacCall bringing up the rear, ascended to the upper deck. There they saw Dot and Tess pointing down the towpath. Hank Dayton was, indeed, having trouble with the mules. And Tess had not ex-

aggerated when she said that one of the animals was trying to kick the driver into the canal.

"Oh! Oh!" screamed Ruth and Agnes, as the flying heels barely missed the man's head.

"I'll go and give him a hand!" exclaimed Neale, and before any one knew what his intention was he ran down the stairs, out to the lower forward deck of the craft, and leaped across the intervening water to the towpath, an easy feat for a lad as agile as Neale O'Neil.

"What's the matter, Hank?" those on the *Bluebird* could hear Neale ask the driver.

"Oh, Arabella is feeling rather frisky, I guess," was the answer. "She hasn't had much work to do lately, and she's showing off!" Arabella was the name of one of the mules.

Neale, born in a circus, knew a good deal about animals, and it did not take him and Hank Dayton long to subdue the fractious Arabella. After she had kicked up her heels a few more times, just to show her contempt for the authority of the whiffletree and the traces, she quieted down. The other mule, a more sedate animal, looked at his companion in what might have been disgust mingled with distrust.

"Are they all right now?" asked Ruth, as Neale leaped aboard the boat again.

"Oh, yes. Hank can manage 'em all right. He just had to let Arabella have her kick out. She's all right now. Isn't this fun, though?"

and Neale breathed in deeply of the fresh air.

"Oh, Neale, it's glorious!" and Agnes' eyes sparkled.

The day had turned out a lovely one after the hard shower, and everything was fresh and green. They had reached the outskirts of Milton by this time, and were approaching the open country through which the canal meandered before joining the river. On either side of the towpath were farms and gardens, with a house set here and there amid the green fields or orchards.

Now and then other boats were passed. At such times one of the craft would have to slow up to let the tow-rope sink into the canal, so the other boat might pass over it. The mules hee-hawed to each other as they met, and Hank exchanged salutations with the other drivers.

"I think it's just the loveliest way to spend a vacation that ever could be thought of," said Agnes to Mr. Howbridge.

"I hope you all like it," he remarked.

"Oh, yes, it's going to be perfect," said the older Kenway girl. "If only—"

"You are thinking of your jewelry," interrupted her guardian. "Please don't! It will be recovered by the police."

"I don't believe so," said Ruth. "I don't care so much about our things. We can buy more. But mother's wedding ring can never be replaced nor, I fear, found. I believe those Klondikers

will dispose of it in some way. They'll never be caught."

"Klondikers!" cried Neale, coming into the main cabin just then. "Did you say Klondikers?" and it was plain to be seen that he was thinking of his father.

"Yes. There is a suspicion that the men who robbed Ruth were two men who the day before looked at the Stetson flat," explained Agnes. "They said they were Klondike miners."

"Klondike miners!" murmured Neale. "I wonder if they knew my father or if he knew them. I don't mean the robbers," he added quickly. "I mean the men who came to rent the flat. I wish I had a chance to speak to them."

"So do I," said Mr. Howbridge. "I have hardly yet had a chance to tell you, Neale, but I have a letter from your Uncle Bill."

"Does he know about father?" asked the boy quickly.

"No. This letter was written before he received mine asking for your father's last known address. But it may be possible for you to meet your uncle during this trip."

"How?" asked Neale.

"He tells me in his letter the names of the places where the circus will show in the next month. And one place is not far from a town we pass on the canal."

"Then I'm going to see him!" cried Neale joy-

fully. "I'll be glad to meet him again. He may know something of my father. I wonder if they have any new animals since last summer. They ought to have a pony to take Scalawag's place.

"He didn't say," remarked the lawyer. "But I thought you'd be glad to know that your uncle was in this vicinity."

"I am," said the boy. "This trip is going to be better than I thought. Now, if he only has word of my father!"

"We'll find him, sooner or later," declared the guardian of the Corner House girls. "But now, since the mules seem to be doing their duty, suppose we take account of stock and see if we need anything. If we do, we ought to stop and get it at one of the places through which we pass, because we may tie up at night near some small village where they don't keep hair pins and—er—whatever else you young ladies need," and he smiled quizzically at Ruth.

"Thank you! We brought all the hairpins we need!" Agnes informed him.

"And I think we have enough to eat," added Ruth. "At least Mrs. Mac is busy in the kitchen, and something smells mighty good."

Indeed appetizing odors were permeating the interior of the *Bluebird,* and a little later the company were sitting down to a most delightful meal. Dot and Tess could hardly be induced to come down off the upper deck long enough to eat, so

fascinated were they with the things they saw along the canal.

"Isn't Hank going to eat, and the mules, too?" asked Dot, as she finished and took her "Alice-doll" up, ready to resume her station under the awning.

"Oh, yes. Mrs. MacCall will see that he gets what he needs, and Hank, as you call him, will feed the mules," said Mr. Howbridge.

"Do you think we ought to call him Hank?" asked Tess. "It seems so familiar."

"He's used to it," answered Neale. "Everybody along the canal calls him that. He's been a driver for years, before he went to traveling around, and met men who knew my father."

"Hum! That just reminds me," said the lawyer musingly, as Dot and Tess hurried from the table. "Perhaps I ought to question Hank about the two Klondikers who inquired about the Stetson flat. He may know of them. Well, it will do to-night after we have tied up."

"Where is Hank going to sleep?" asked Ruth, who, filling the rôle of housekeeper, thought she must carry out her duties even on the *Bluebird*.

"He will sleep on the upper deck. I have a cot for him," said the lawyer. "The mules will be tethered on the towpath. It is warm now, and they won't need shelter. They are even used to being out in the rain."

The afternoon was drawing to a close, matters

aboard the houseboat had been arranged to satisfy even the critical taste of Ruth, and Mrs. MacCall was beginning to put her mind on the preparation of supper when Dot, who had come below to get a new dress for her "Alice-doll," ran from the storeroom where the trunks and valises had been put.

"Oh! Oh, Ruth!" gasped the little girl. "Somebody's in there!"

"In where?" asked Ruth, who was writing a letter at the living-room table.

"In there!" and Dot pointed toward the storeroom, which was at the stern of the boat under the stairs that led up on deck.

"Some one in there?" repeated Ruth. "Well, that's very possible. Mrs. Mac may be there, or Neale or—"

"No, it isn't any of them!" insisted Dot. "I saw everybody that belongs to us. It's somebody else! He's in the storeroom, and he sneezed and made a noise like a goat."

"You ridiculous child! what do you mean?" exclaimed Agnes, who was just passing through the room and heard what Dot said.

"You probably heard one of Hank's mules hee-hawing," said Ruth, getting up from her chair.

"Mules don't sneeze!" declared Dot with conviction.

Ruth had to admit the truth of this.

"You come and see!" urged Dot, and, clasping

her sister's hand, she led her into the storeroom, Agnes following.

"What's up?" asked Mr. Howbridge, coming along just then.

"Oh, Dot imagines she heard some unusual noise," explained Ruth.

"I did hear it!" insisted the younger girl. "It was a sneeze and a bleat like a goat and it smells like a goat, too. Smell it!" she cried, vigorously sniffing the air as she paused on the threshold of the storeroom. "Don't you smell it?"

Just then the silence was shattered by a vigorous sneeze, followed by the unmistakable bleating of a goat, and out of a closet came fairly tumbling —a stowaway!

CHAPTER XI

OVERBOARD

"THERE! What did I tell you!" cried Dot, pointing a finger at the strange sight. "I heard a noise, and then it was a sneeze and then it was a bleat and then I *smelled* a goat. I knew it was a goat, and it is, and it's Sammy Pinkney, too!"

And, surely enough, it was. Tousled and disheveled, dirty and with his clothes awry, there stood the urchin who was, it seemed, continually getting into mischief at or around the Corner House.

But if Sammy was mussed up because of having been hidden in a small closet, the goat did not appear to be any the worse for his misadventure. Billy Bumps was as fresh as a daisy, and suddenly he lowered his head and made a dive for Mr. Howbridge.

"Oh!" cried Ruth. "Look out!"

"Hold him!" yelled Agnes.

Neale, who had joined the wondering throng now gazing at the stowaway, caught the goat by

the animal's collar just in time, and held him back from butting the lawyer.

"He—he's just a little excited like," Sammy explained.

"Well, I should think he would be!" declared Ruth, taking command of the situation, as she often had to do where Sammy was concerned. "And now what do you mean, hiding yourself and Billy Bumps on the boat?" she demanded. "Why did you do it? And why, above all things, bring the goat?"

" 'Cause I knew you wouldn't let me come any other way," Sammy answered. "I wanted to go houseboating awful bad, but I didn't think you'd take me and Billy. So this morning, when you was packing up, me and him came down here and we got on board. I hid us in a closet, and we was going to stay there until night and then maybe you'd be so far away you couldn't send us back. But something tickled my nose and I sneezed, and I guess Billy thought I was sneezing at him, for he bleated and then he butted his head against the door and it came open and—and—"

But Sammy really had to stop—he was out of breath.

"Well, of all things!" cried Agnes.

"It is rather remarkable," agreed Mr. Howbridge. "I don't know that I ever before had to deal with a stowaway. The question that's puzzling me is, what shall we do with him?"

"Can't me and Billy stay?" asked Sammy, catching drift of an objection to his presence on board.

"Of course not!" voiced Ruth. "What would your mother and father say?"

"Oh, they wouldn't care," Sammy said, easily enough and brightening visibly at the question. "They let me stay when I went with you on our auto tour."

"They surely did," remarked Agnes dryly.

"And Billy's strong, too!" went on Sammy eagerly. "If one of the mules got sick he could help pull the boat."

"The idea!" exclaimed Agnes.

"Oh, hello, Sammy!" called Tess, who had just heard of the discovery of the stowaway.

"Hello," Sammy returned. "I'm here!"

They all laughed.

"Well," said Mr. Howbridge at length, as the houseboat was slowly pulled along the canal by the mules driven by Hank, "we must get Sammy home somehow, though how is puzzling me."

"Oh, please can't I stay?" begged the boy. "You can send Billy home, of course. I don't know why I brought him. But let me stay. I'm going to be a canal mule driver when I grow up, and I could begin now if you wanted me to."

"Aren't you going to be a pirate?" asked Agnes, for such had been Sammy's desire for years.

"Yes, of course. But I'm going to be a canal mule driver first."

"It's out of the question," said Ruth firmly. "It was very wrong of you to hide away on board, Sammy. Very wrong indeed! And it is going to be a great bother for us to send you and Billy Bumps back home, as we must do. Twice for the same trick is too often."

"Aw, say, Ruthie, you might turn Billy Bumps loose here on the bank and let me stay," pleaded Sammy. "Billy can take care of himself well enough."

"Sammy Pinkney!" exclaimed Tess, her eyes blazing. "Turn our goat loose just because you brought him along when you know you had no business to do that! Sammy Pinkney, you are the very worst boy I ever heard of!"

Sammy looked rather frightened for the first time since being found on the boat, for, after all, he had an immense respect for the usually gentle Tess, and cared more for her good opinion than he did for that of her elders.

"I didn't mean to be bad," he whined. "I wanted to go along, that's all."

"But you wasn't asked," Tess insisted, pouting.

"But I wasn't asked on that auto tour," went on Sammy hopefully.

"Well, that was—was different," stammered Tess. "Anyway, you had no right to talk about

turning our goat loose. Why, somebody might steal him!"

"What shall we do?" Ruth appealed to Mr. Howbridge. "Can a boat turn around in the canal?"

"Not wide enough here," volunteered Neale, looking from a window. "But we can when we get to the big waters, about five miles farther along."

"It will not be necessary to turn about and go back," said the lawyer. "I'll have to make arrangements for some one either to take charge of our stowaway at the next large town, and keep him there until his father can come for him, or else I may see some one going back to Milton by whom we can return our interesting specimens," and he included boy and goat in his glances.

"Well, I was afraid you'd send us back," said Sammy with a sigh. "But could I stay to supper?" he asked, as he sniffed the appetizing odors that now seemed more completely to fill the interior of the *Bluebird*.

"Of course you may stay to supper, Sammy," conceded Ruth. "And then we'll see what's to be done. Oh, what a boy you are!" and she had to laugh, though she did not want to.

"I was hoping Sammy could come," murmured Dot, as she hugged her "Alice-doll."

"And Billy Bumps is fun," added Tess.

"We have no room here for goats, whether they are funny or not," declared Agnes. "Take him out in front, on the lower deck, Sammy. Tie him there, and then wash yourself for supper. I should think you would have smothered in that closet."

"I did, almost," confessed the boy. "And Billy didn't like it, either. But we wanted to come."

"Too bad—young ambition nipped in the bud," murmured Mr. Howbridge. "Take Billy outside, Sammy."

The goat was rather frisky, and it required Neale and Sammy to tie him to the forward rail on the lower deck. Then Mrs. MacCall, in the kindness of her Scotch heart, sent the "beastie," as she called him, some odds and ends of food, including beet tops from the kitchen, and Billy, at least, was happy.

"Low bridge!" suddenly came the call from Hank, up ahead with the two mules.

"What's he saying?" asked Ruth to Mr. Howbridge.

"He's giving warning that we are approaching a low bridge, and that if we stay on deck and hold our heads too high we may get bumped. Yes, there's the bridge just ahead. I wonder if we can pass beneath it. Our houseboat is higher than a canal boat."

The stream curved then, and gave a view of a

white bridge spanning it. Hank had had the first glimpse of it. It was necessary for the occupants of the upper deck either to desert it, or to crouch down below the railing, and they did the former.

There was just room for the *Bluebird* to squeeze through under the bridge, and beyond it lay a good-sized town.

"I think I can get some one there to take Sammy home, together with Billy Bumps," said Mr. Howbridge. "We'll try after supper, and then we must see about tying up for the night."

The houseboat attracted considerable attention as it was slowly drawn along the canal, which passed through the middle of the town. A stop was made while Mr. Howbridge instituted inquiries as to the possibility of sending Sammy back to Milton, and arrangements were made with a farmer who agreed to hitch up after supper and deliver the goat and the boy where they belonged.

"Well, anyhow, I'm glad I'm going to stay to supper," said Sammy, extracting what joy he could from the situation that had turned against him.

The *Bluebird* came to rest at a pleasant place in the canal just outside the town, and there supper was served by Mrs. MacCall. A bountiful one it was, too, and after Hank had had his, apart from the others, he confided to Neale, as he went back to the mules:

"She's the beatenist cook I ever see!"

"Good, you mean?" asked Neale, smiling.

"The best ever! I haven't eaten victuals like 'em since I had a home and a mother, and that's years and years back. I'm glad I struck this job."

In the early evening the farmer came for Sammy and the goat, a small crate, that once had held a sheep, being put in the back of the wagon for Billy's accommodation.

"Well, maybe you'll take me next time, when I've growed bigger," suggested the boy, as he waved rather a sad farewell to his friends.

"Maybe," said Ruth, but under her breath she added: "Not if I know it."

"Good-by, Sammy!" called Dot.

But Tess, still indignant over Sammy's suggestion to turn the goat—her goat—loose to shift for himself, called merely:

"Good-by, Billy Bumps!"

Mr. Howbridge went into the town and telephoned to Milton to let Sammy's father know the boy was safe and on his way back, and then matters became rather more quiet aboard the *Bluebird.*

The houseboat was towed to a good place in which to spend the night. Lines were carried ashore and the craft moored to trees along the towpath.

The mules were given their suppers and teth-

ered, and Hank announced that he was going to do some fishing before he "turned in."

"Oh, could I fish, too?" cried Dot.

"And me! I want to!" added Tess.

"I think they might be allowed to," said Mr. Howbridge. "There are really good fish in the canal, coming from Lake Macopic, and we could cook them for breakfast. They'd keep all right in the ice box—if any are caught."

"Oh, I'll catch some!" declared Hank. "I've fished in the canal before."

"Oh, please let us!" begged the small girls.

"But you have no poles, lines or anything," objected Ruth.

"I've got lines and hooks, and I can easy cut some poles," offered Hank, and so it was arranged.

A little later, while Ruth, Agnes and Mrs. MacCall were busy with such housework as was necessary aboard the *Bluebird,* and while Neale and Mr. Howbridge were getting Hank's cot in readiness on the deck, the mule driver and Dot and Tess sat on the stern of the craft with their lines in the water.

It was a still, quiet evening, restful and peaceful, and as Hank had told the girls that fish liked quietness, no one of the trio was speaking above a whisper.

"Have you got a bite?" suddenly asked Tess in a low voice of her sister.

"No, not yet. I'm going to set my Alice-doll up where she can watch me. She never saw anybody catch a fish—my Alice-doll didn't." And Dot propped her "child" up near her, on the deck of the craft.

Suddenly Hank pulled his pole up sharply.

"I got one!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, I wish I'd get one!" echoed Tess.

"Let me see!" fairly shouted Dot. "Let me see the fish, Hank!" She struggled to her feet, and the next moment a wild cry rang out.

"She's fallen in! Oh, she's fallen in! Oh, get her out!"

CHAPTER XII

NEALE WONDERS

Dot's startled cries roused all on board the *Bluebird*. Neale and Mr. Howbridge dropped the cot they were setting in place under the awning, and rushed to the railing of the deck. Inside the boat Ruth, Agnes and Mrs. MacCall hurried to windows where they could look out toward the stern where the fishing party had seated themselves.

"Man overboard!" sang out Neale, hardly thinking what he was doing.

But, to the surprise of all the startled ones, they saw at the stern of the boat, Hank, Dot and Tess, and from Hank's line was dangling a wiggling fish.

But Dot was pointing to something in the water.

"Why!" exclaimed Ruth, "no one has fallen in. What can the child mean?"

"She said—" began Agnes, but she was interrupted by Dot who exclaimed:

"It's my Alice-doll! She fell in when I got up to look at Hank's fish! Oh, somebody please get my Alice-doll!"

"I will in jest a minute now, little lady!" cried the mule driver. "It's bad luck to let your first fish git away. Jest a minute now, and I'll save your Alice-doll!"

Neale and Mr. Howbridge hurried down to the lower deck from the top one in time to see Hank take his fish from the hook and toss it into a pail of water the mule driver had placed near by for just this purpose. Then as Hank took off his coat and seemed about to plunge overboard into the canal, to rescue the doll, Ruth said:

"Don't let him, Mr. Howbridge. Dot's doll isn't worth having him risk his life for."

"Risking my life, Miss Kenway! It wouldn't be that," said Hank, with a laugh. "I can swim, and I'd just like a bath."

"Here's a boat hook," said Neale, offering one, and while Dot and Tess clung to one another Hank managed to fish up the "Alice-doll," Dot's special prize, which was, fortunately, floating alongside the houseboat.

"There you are, little lady!" exclaimed the driver, and he began to squeeze some of the water from Alice.

"Oh, please don't!" begged Dot.

"Don't what?" asked Hank.

"Please don't choke her that way. All her sawdust might come out. It did once. I'll just hang her up to dry. Poor Alice-doll!" murmured the little girl, as she clasped her toy in her arms.

While Dot and Tess clung to one another, Hank managed to fish up the "Alice-doll". Page 118

"Were you almost drowned?" and she cuddled her doll still closer in her arms.

"Don't hold her so close to you, Dot," cautioned Ruth. "She'll get you soaking wet."

"I don't care!" muttered Dot. "I've got to put dry clothes on her so she won't catch cold."

"And that's just what I don't want to have to do for you—change your clothes again to-day," went on Ruth. "You can love your doll even if you don't hold her so close."

"Well, anyhow I'm glad she didn't drcwn," said Dot.

"So'm I," remarked Tess. "I'll go and help you change her. I'm glad we didn't bring Almira and her kittens along, for they look so terrible when they're wet—cats do."

"And I'm glad we didn't have Sammy and Billy Bumps here to fall in!" laughed Agnes. "Goats are even worse in the water than cats."

"Well, aren't you going to help me fish any more?" asked Hank, as the two little girls walked away, deserting their poles and lines.

"I have to take care of my Alice-doll," declared Dot.

"And I have to help her," said Tess.

"I'll take a hand at fishing, if you don't mind," said Neale.

"And I wouldn't mind trying myself," added the lawyer. And when Hank's sleeping quarters had been arranged the three men, though perhaps

Neale could hardly be called that, sat together at the stern of the boat, their lines in the water.

"Mr. Howbridge is almost like a boy himself on this trip, isn't he?" said Agnes to Ruth as the two sisters helped Mrs. MacCall make up the berths for the night.

"Yes, he is, and I'm glad of it. I wouldn't know what to do if some grave, tiresome old man had charge of our affairs."

"Well now, who is going to have first luck?" questioned Mr. Howbridge, jokingly, as the three sat down to try their hands at fishing.

"I guess the luck will go to the first one who gets a catch," returned Neale.

"Luck goes to the one who gits the biggest fish," put in the mule driver.

After that there was silence for a few minutes. Then the lawyer gave a cry of satisfaction.

"Got a bite?" questioned Hank.

"I have and he's a beauty," was the reply, and Mr. Howbridge drew up a fair-sized fish.

A minute later Neale found something on his hook. It was so large he had to play his catch.

"You win!" cried the lawyer, when the fish was brought on board. And he was right, for it was the largest catch made by any of them.

The fishing party had good luck, and a large enough supply was caught for a meal the next day. Hank cleaned them and put them in the ice box,

for a refrigerator was among the fittings on the *Bluebird.*

Then, as night came on, Dot and Tess were put to bed, Dot insisting on having her "Alice-doll" placed near her bunk to dry. Hank retired to his secluded cot on the upper deck, the mules had been tethered in a sheltered grove of trees just off the towpath, and everything was made snug for the night.

"How do you like the trip so far?" asked Mr. Howbridge of Ruth and Agnes, as he sat in the main cabin, talking with them and Neale.

"It's just perfect!" exclaimed Agnes. "And I know we're going to like it more and more each day."

"Yes, it is a most novel way of spending the summer vacation," agreed Ruth, but there was little animation in her voice.

"Are you still mourning the loss of your jewelry?" asked the lawyer, noting her rather serious face.

Ruth nodded. "Mother's wedding ring was in that box," she said softly.

"You must not let it spoil your trip," her guardian continued. "I think there is a good chance of getting it back."

"Do you mean you think the police will catch those rough men who robbed us?" asked Ruth.

"Yes," answered the lawyer. "I told them they must spare no effort to locate the ruffians, and

they have sent an alarm to all the neighboring towns and cities. Men of that type will not find it easy to dispose of the rings and pins, and they may have to carry them around with them for some time. I really believe you will get back your things."

"Oh, I hope so!" exclaimed Ruth. "It has been an awful shock."

"I would rather they had taken a much larger amount of jewelry than have harmed either you or Agnes," went on the guardian. "They were ruffians of the worst type, and would not have stopped at injuring a person to get what they wanted. But don't worry, we shall hear good news from the police, I am sure."

"I believe that, too," put in Neale. "I wish I was as sure of hearing good news of my father."

"That is going to be a little harder problem," said Mr. Howbridge. "However, we are doing all we can. I am hoping your Uncle Bill will have had definite news of your father and of where he has settled since he came back from the Klondike. Your father would be most likely to communicate with your uncle first."

"I suppose so," agreed Neale. "But when shall we see Uncle Bill?"

"As I told you," went on the lawyer, "his circus will soon show at a town near which we shall pass in the boat. The younger children will probably want to go to the circus, and that will give me

a good excuse for attending myself," the lawyer went on with a laugh, in which Ruth joined.

The night passed quietly, though about twelve o'clock another boat came along and had to pass the *Bluebird*. As there is but one towpath along a canal, it is necessary when two boats meet, or when one passes the other, for the tow-line of one to go under or over the tow-line of the second boat.

As the *Bluebird* was tied to the shore it was needful, in this case, for the tow-line of the passing boat to be lifted up over it, and when this was being done it awakened Ruth and Agnes. At first the girls were startled, but they settled back when the nature of the disturbance was known.

Dot half awakened and murmured something about some one trying to take her "Alice-doll," but Ruth soon quieted her.

Neale was awake early the next morning, and went on the upper deck for a breath of air before breakfast. He saw Hank emerge from the curtained-off place that had been arranged for the sleeping quarters of the mule driver.

"Well, do we start soon?" asked Hank, yawning and stretching.

"I think so," Neale answered, and then he saw Hank make a sudden dart for something that had evidently slipped from a hole in his pocket. It was something that rolled across the deck, something round, and shining like gold.

The mule driver made a dive for the object and caught it before it could roll off the deck, and Neale had a chance to see that it was a gold ring.

Without a word Hank picked it up and put it back in his pocket. Then, without a glance at the boy, he turned aside, and, making his way to the towpath, he began carrying the mules their morning feed.

Neale stood staring after him, and at the memory of the ring he became possessed of strange thoughts and wonderings.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TRICK MULE

NEALE O'NEIL was wiser than most boys of his age. Perhaps having once lived in a circus had something to do with it. At any rate, among the things he had learned was to think first and speak afterward. And he decided to put this into practice now. He was doing a deal of thinking about the ring he had seen roll over the deck to be so quickly, almost secretively, picked up by Hank Dayton. But of it Neale said nothing to the mule driver nor to those aboard the *Bluebird.*

Walking about on the upper deck and looking down the towpath toward Hank, who was bringing the mules from their sylvan stable to feed them, Neale heard Ruth call:

"How's the weather up there?"

"Glorious!" cried the boy. "It's going to be a dandy day."

"That's great!" exclaimed Ruth. "Come on, children!" she called. "Everybody up! The mules are up and we must be up too," she went on, paraphrasing a little verse in the school reader.

"Did any of the mules fall into the canal?" asked Dot, as she made haste to look at her "Alice-

doll," who had dried satisfactorily during the night.

"Course not! Why should a mule fall into the canal?" asked Tess.

"Well, they might. My doll did," went on the smallest Corner House girl. "But, anyhow, I'm glad they didn't."

"Yes, so am I," remarked Mr. Howbridge, as they all gathered around the breakfast table, which Mrs. MacCall had set, singing the while some Scotch song containing many new and strange words.

"Well, shall we travel on?" asked the lawyer, when the meal was over and Hank was hitching the mules to the tow-rope, the animals and their driver having had a satisfying meal.

"Oh, yes, let's go on!" urged Agnes. "I'm crazy to go through one of the locks."

"Will there be any trouble about getting the houseboat through?" asked Ruth of her guardian. "She is a pretty big craft!"

"But not as long as many of the canal boats, though a trifle wider, or 'of more beam,' as a sailor would say," he remarked. "No, the locks are large enough to let us through. But tell me, do you find this method of travel too slow?" he went on. "I know you young folks like rapid motion, and this may bore you," and he glanced quickly at Ruth.

"Oh, not at all," she hastened to say. "I love it. The mules are so calm and peaceful."

Just then one of the animals let out a terrific hee-haw and Agnes, covering her ears with her hands, laughed at her sister.

"That's just as good as a honk-honk horn on an auto!" exclaimed Tess.

"Calm and peaceful!" tittered Agnes. "How do you like that, Ruth?"

"I don't mind it at all," was the calm answer. "It blends in well with the environment, and it's much better than the shriek of a locomotive whistle."

"Bravo, Minerva!" cried Mr. Howbridge. "You should have been a lawyer. I shall call you Portia for a change."

"Don't, please!" she begged. "You have enough nicknames for me now."

"Very well then, we'll stick to the old ones. And, meanwhile, if you are all ready I'll give the word to Hank to start his mules. There is no hurry on this trip, as the man to whom I am to deliver this boat has no special need for it. But we may as well travel on."

"I'll be glad when I can start the gasolene motor," remarked Neale.

"Which will be as soon as we get off the canal and into the river," said the lawyer. "I'd use the motor now, only the canal company won't permit

it on account of the wash of the propeller tearing away the banks."

The tow-line tauted as the mules leaned forward in their collars, and once more the *Bluebird* was under way.

Life aboard the houseboat was simple and easy, as it was intended to be. There was little housework to do, and it was soon over, and all that remained was to sit on deck and watch the ever-changing scenery. The changes were not too rapid, either, for a boat towed on a canal does not progress very fast.

"It's like a moving picture, isn't it?" remarked Agnes. "It puts me in mind of some scenes in foreign countries—rural scenes, I mean."

"Only the moving pictures move so much faster," returned Ruth, with a smile. "They show you hundreds of miles in a few minutes."

"Gracious, I wouldn't want to ride as fast as that," exclaimed Tess. "We'd fall off or blow away sure!"

It just suited the Corner House girls, though, and Neale extracted full enjoyment from it, though, truth to tell, he was rather worried in his mind. One matter was the finding of his father, and the other was a suspicion concerning Hank and the ring.

This was a suspicion which, as yet, Neale hardly admitted to himself very plainly. He wanted to watch the mule driver for a time yet.

"It may not have been one of Ruth's rings, to begin with," reasoned Neale. "And, if it is, I don't believe Hank had anything to do with taking it, though he may know who did. I've got to keep on the watch!"

His meditations were interrupted, as he sat on the deck of the boat, by hearing Hank cry:

"Lock! Lock!"

That meant the boat was approaching one of the devices by which canal craft are taken over hills. A canal is, of course, a stream on a level. It does not run like a river. In fact, it is just like a big ditch.

But as a canal winds over the country it comes to hills, and to get up or down these, two methods are employed. One is what is called an inclined plane.

The canal comes to the foot of a hill and stops. There a sort of big cradle is let down into the water, the boat is floated into the cradle, and then boat, cradle and all are pulled up over the hill on a sort of railroad track, a turbine water wheel usually furnishing the power. Once over the brow of the hill the cradle and boat slide down into the water again and the journey is resumed.

The other means of getting a canal boat over a hill is by means of a lock. When the waterway is stopped in its level progress by reaching a hill, a square place is excavated and lined with rocks so

as to form a water-tight basin, the open end being closed by big, wooden gates.

The *Bluebird* was now approaching one of these locks, where it was to be raised from a low to a higher level. While Hank managed the mules, Neale steered the boat into the stone-lined basin. Then the big gates were closed behind the craft, and the mules, being unhitched, were sent forward to begin towing again when the boat should have been lifted.

"Now we can watch!" said Dot as she and Tess took their places at the railing. Going through canal locks was a novelty for them, as there were no locks near Milton, though the canal ran through the town.

Once the *Bluebird* was locked within the small stone-lined basin, water was admitted to it through gates at the other and higher end. These gates kept the body of water on the higher level from pouring into the lower part of the canal. Faster and faster the water rushed in as the lock keeper opened more valves in the big gates. The water foamed and hissed all around the boat.

"Oh, we're going up!" cried Dot. "Look, we're rising!"

"Just like in an elevator!" added Tess.

And, indeed, that is just what it was like. The water lifted the *Bluebird* up higher and higher. As soon as the water had raised it to the upper

level, the other gates were opened, and the *Bluebird* moved slowly out of the lock, having been raised about fifteen feet, from a lower to a higher level. Going from a higher to a lower is just the reverse of this. Sometimes a hill is so high that three sets of locks are necessary to get a boat up or down.

Once more the mules were hitched to the towline, and started off. As the boat left the lock another one came in, which was to be lowered. The children watched this as long as they could, and then turned their attention to new scenes.

It was toward the close of the afternoon, during which nothing exciting had happened, except that Tess nearly fell overboard while leaning too far across the rail to see something in the water, that Neale, looking forward toward the mules and their driver, saw a man leading a lone animal come out of a shanty along the towpath and begin to talk to Hank.

Hank halted his team, and the *Bluebird* slowly came to a stop. Mr. Howbridge, who was talking to Ruth and Agnes, looked up from a book of accounts he was going over with them and inquired:

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, Hank has met a friend, I imagine," ventured Neale. "It's a man with a lone mule."

"Well, he shouldn't stop just to have a friendly

talk," objected the lawyer. "We aren't hiring him for that. Give him a call, Neale, and see what he means."

But before this could be done Hank turned, and, making a megaphone of his hands, called:

"Say, do you folks want to buy a good mule cheap?"

"Buy a mule," repeated the lawyer, somewhat puzzled.

"Yes. This man has one to sell, and it might be a good plan for us to have an extra one."

"I never thought of that," said the lawyer. "It might be a good plan. Let's go up and see about it, Neale."

"Let's all go," proposed Agnes. "It will rest us to walk along the towpath."

The *Bluebird* was near shore and there was no difficulty in getting to the path. Then all save Mrs. MacCall, who preferred to remain on board, walked up toward the two men and the three mules.

The man who had stopped Hank was a rough-looking character, but many towpath men were that, and little was thought of it at the time.

"Do you folks want to buy a good mule?" he asked. "I'll sell him cheap," he went on. "I had a team, but the other died on me."

"I'm not much of an authority on mules," said Mr. Howbridge slowly. "What do you say,

Neale? Would you advise purchasing this animal if he is a bargain?''

Neale did not answer. He was carefully looking at the mule, which stood near the other two.

''Where'd you get this mule?'' asked Neale quickly, looking at the stranger.

''Oh, I've had him a good while. He's one of a team, but I sold my boat and—''

''This mule never towed a boat!'' said the boy quickly.

''What makes you say that?'' demanded the man in an angry voice.

''Because I know,'' went on Neale. ''This is a trick mule, and, unless I'm greatly mistaken, he used to be in my uncle's circus!''

CHAPTER XIV

AT THE CIRCUS

ALL eyes were turned on Neale O'Neil as he said this, and it would be difficult to say who was the more astonished. As for the Corner House girls, they simply stared at their friend. Hank Dayton looked surprised, and then he glanced from the mule in question to the man who had offered to dispose of the animal. Mr. Howbridge looked very much interested. As for the strange tramp—for that is what he was—he seemed very angry.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "This mule isn't any trick mule!"

"Oh, isn't he?" asked Neale quietly. "And I suppose he never was in a circus, either?"

"Of course not!" declared the man. "Who are you, anyhow, and what do you mean by talking that way?"

"I advise you to be a little more respectful in tone," said Mr. Howbridge in his suave, lawyer's voice. "If we do any business at all it will be on this boy's recommendation. He knows about mules. I do not. I shall hear what he and Hank have to say."

"Well, it's all foolish saying this mule was in a circus," blustered the man. "I've had him over a year, and I want to sell him now because he hasn't any mate. I can't pull a canal boat with one mule."

"Especially not a trick mule that never hauled a boat in his life," put in Neale.

"Here! You quit that! What do you mean?" demanded the man in sullen tones.

"I mean just what I said," declared Neale. "I believe this is a trick mule that used to be in my uncle Bill's show—in Twomley and Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie, to be exact. Of course I may be mistaken, but if not I can easily prove what I say."

"Huh! I'd like to see you do it!" sneered the man.

"All right, I will," and Neale's manner was confident. "I recognize this mule," he went on to Mr. Howbridge, "by that mark on his off hind hoof," and he pointed to a bulge on the mule's foot. "But of course that may be on another mule, as well as on the one that was in my uncle's circus. However, if I can make this mule do a trick I taught old Josh in the show, that ought to prove what I say, oughtn't it?"

"I should think so," agreed the lawyer.

"You can't make this mule do any tricks," sneered the tramp. "He's a good mule for pulling canal boats, but he can't do tricks."

"Oh, can't he?" remarked Neale. "Well, we'll see. Come here, Josh!" he suddenly called.

The mule moved his big ears forward, as though to make sure of the voice, and then, looking at Neale, slowly approached him.

"Anybody could do that!" exclaimed the man disdainfully.

"Well, can anybody do this?" asked the boy. "Josh—dead mule!" he suddenly cried. And, to the surprise of all, the mule dropped to the tow-path, stretched out his legs stiffly and lay on his side with every appearance of having departed this life.

"There!" exclaimed Neale. "That's the trick I taught him in the show, before I left it."

The other mules were sniffing at their prostrate companion.

"Oh, isn't he funny!" cried Dot, as Josh opened one eye and looked straight at her.

"I'd rather have a mule than Billy Bumps for a pet!" declared Tess.

"Did you really make him do it, Neale?" asked Ruth.

"Yes, and I can do it again!" declared the lad. "Up, Josh!" he commanded, and the mule scrambled to his feet. "Dead mule—Josh!" cried Neale again, and down the animal went a second time.

"Well, what have you to say to that?" the boy turned to ask the tramp. But the man did not

stay to answer. Off he ran, down the towpath, at top speed.

"Shall I get him?" cried Hank, throwing the reins on the back of one of his mules, while Josh, in response to a command from Neale, stood upright again.

"No, let him go," advised Mr. Howbridge. "It is very evident that he had no legal claim to this mule, and he either took him away from the circus himself, or received him from some one who did. Neale, I congratulate you."

"Thanks. I thought I recognized old Uncle Josh, but the trick proved it. He hasn't forgotten that or me; have you, old fellow?" he asked as he rubbed the mule's velvety nose. And the animal seemed glad to be near the boy.

"Pretty slick, I call that," said Hank admiringly. "Guess you'll have to teach my mules some trick, Neale."

"It takes too long!" laughed the lad.

"Is this our mule now?" asked Dot, as she approached the new animal, which was quite gentle and allowed the children to pet him.

"Well, I don't know just who does own him," said Mr. Howbridge, not wanting to give a legal opinion which might be wrong. "But he certainly does not belong to that man," and he looked after the retreating figure, now far down the towpath.

" 'Cause if he's our mule I'd like to give my Alice-doll a ride on his back," went on Dot.

"I'd like a ride myself!" exclaimed Tess.

"Oh, don't try that!" sighed Ruth.

"Josh wouldn't mind," put in Neale. "I used to ride him in the circus. Look!"

With a spring he reached the mule's back, and then, at the word of command, Josh trotted up and down the towpath.

"Oh, do let me try!" begged Tess.

"Shall I put her on?" Neale asked, and, at a nod from Ruth, he lifted the little girl up on the mule's back, and the delighted Tess was given a ride.

"Oh, it's ever so much nicer'n Scalawag!" she cried as she was lifted down. "Try it, Dot!" Scalawag was the circus pony that Neale's uncle had given to Tess and Dot.

"I will if I can hold my Alice-doll!" stipulated the youngest Kenway.

"Sure!" assented Neale, and the fun was continued.

"I wish I dared to do it!" exclaimed Agnes, with a look at Ruth. But Ruth shook her head, and Agnes, after a moment's hesitation, yielded to Ruth's sense of the fitness of things.

"Well, the question now arises," said Mr. Howbridge, "what shall we do with this mule, which seems to have been stolen?"

"I say take him along with us," answered Hank. "One of our critters might get hurt, and we'd have to lay up if we didn't have an extra one."

"I don't believe Uncle Josh would pull in harness with another mule," said Neale. "He has always been a trick mule, and has worked alone. He is quite valuable."

"Do you suppose your uncle sold him?" asked the lawyer.

"I don't believe so," said the boy. "I believe he was stolen, and I know, in that case, that Uncle Bill would be glad to get him back."

"Well, then let's take him back," suggested Hank. "I can drive him along with my mules for a spell until we come to the place where the circus is playing. He'll drive, I guess, if he won't pull a boat, and he'll be company for my mules." Hank was fond of animals, and treated them kindly.

"How does that plan appeal to you, Minerva?" asked Ruth's guardian. "This is your trip, as well as mine. Do you want to be bothered with an extra mule?"

"Oh, I don't see that he would be any bother," she said. "If Hank looks after him, we shan't have to. And if it's Neale's uncle's mule he ought to be returned."

"That settles it," said Mr. Howbridge. "We'll take the mule with us."

"I'm sure Uncle Bill will be glad to get him back," declared Neale. "And I'm pretty sure he never sold him."

So it was arranged. Once more the *Bluebird* was under way, the two harnessed mules towing

her and Uncle Josh, the trick animal, wandering along at his own sweet will.

For a time the Corner House girls, with Neale and Mr. Howbridge, walked along the towpath. Then they went back to the boat as Mrs. MacCall, blowing on a horn, announced meal time.

The trip along the canal continued in leisurely fashion. Now the *Bluebird* would be lifted up at some water-foaming lock, or lowered in the same fashion. Twice they were lifted over inclined planes, and the young folks, especially Dot and Tess, liked this very much.

The weather had been all that could be desired ever since they started, except the rain storm in which the girls were robbed. But now, about four days after leaving Milton, they awoke one morning to find a disagreeable drizzle. But Hank and the mules did not seem to mind it. In fact they rather liked splashing through the rain and mud.

Of course getting out and strolling along the towpath was out of the question for the voyagers, and they found amusements enough on board the houseboat.

It rained all day, but it needed more than this to take the joy out of life for the Corner House girls.

"Fair day to-morrow!" cried Neale, and so it proved.

They approached a small town early the next

day, and as they tied up at a tow-barn station to get some supplies Dot cried:

"Oh, look at the elephant!"

"Where?" demanded Tess.

"I mean it's a picture of it on that barn," went on the mother of the "Alice-doll," and she pointed.

"Oh, it's a circus!" exclaimed Tess. "Look, Ruth—Agnes!"

And there, in many gay posters was the announcement that "Twomley & Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie" would show that day in Pompey, the town they had then reached.

"It's Uncle Bill's show!" cried Neale. "Maybe I'll hear some news of my father."

"And shall we have to give back Josh mule?" asked Tess, who had taken quite a liking to the animal.

"Well, we'll see," said Mr. Howbridge. "But I think we may as well, all of us, go to the circus," he added.

And, that afternoon, the trick mule having been left in the towpath barn with Hank's animals, almost the whole party, including the driver, went to the circus. Only Mrs. MacCall decided to stay on the houseboat.

On the way to the circus the party passed the post-office. Ruth remembered that this was a town she had mentioned in a letter to Luke Shepard and ran in to see if there was any mail.

"Ruth Kenway," said the clerk, in answer to her question, and a moment later passed out a fine, fat letter, addressed in the hand she knew so well.

"I'll read it to-night—I haven't time now," she told herself, and blushed happily. "Dear Luke—I hope everything is going well with him."

CHAPTER XV

REAL NEWS AT LAST

"Oh, look at the toy balloons! Look, Alice-doll," and Dot held her constant companion up in her arms.

Dot was in a state of great excitement, and kept repeating to Tess stories of her experiences of the summer previous when Dot, her older sisters and some friends, seated in a box of this very circus, Scalawag, the pony, had been publicly presented to the smaller Corner House girls—a scene, and a sensation, which is told of in a previous volume of this series and which, alas! Tess had missed.

"There's pink lemonade!" cried Tess. "Oh, I want some of that! Please, Ruth, may I have two glasses?"

"Not of that pink lemonade, Tess," answered the older girl. "It may be colored with hat dye, for all we know. We'll see Neale's Uncle Bill, who will take us to the best place to get something to drink."

"Just see the fat lady!" went on Dot next.

"Fat lady! Where? I don't see any!" exclaimed Tess. "Do you mean an elephant?" she asked.

"No. I mean over there!" and Dot pointed to a gayly painted canvas stretched along the front of the tent in which the side shows were showing.

"Oh, that! Only a painting!" and Tess showed in her voice the disappointment she felt.

"Well, the lady is real, and we can go inside and see her; can't we, Ruth?" pursued Dot. "Oh, I just love a circus; don't you, Alice?" and she hugged her doll in her arms.

"Yes, a circus is very nice," was the answer. "But now listen to me," went on Ruth. "Don't run away and get lost in the crowd."

"You couldn't run very far in such a crowd," answered Tess.

"No, but you could get lost very easily."

"Oh, see the camels! They are going for a drink, I guess."

"Well, they have to have water the same as the other animals."

"Oh, what was that?" cried Dot, as a gigantic roar rent the air.

"That must have been a lion," answered Ruth.

"Oh, do you think he'll get loose?" exclaimed Tess, holding back a little.

"I guess not."

"It's the same old crowd," remarked Neale, as he looked on the familiar scenes about the circus tent, while Mr. Howbridge walked along with Ruth. Agnes and Neale were together, and Dot and Tess had hold of hands. Hank, after the

arrival at the grounds, said he would travel around by himself, as he saw some men he knew. He agreed to be back at the canal boat at five o'clock, after the show.

"Wait until I get you a ticket," Neale said, as the mule driver was about to separate from them. Going to the red and gold wagon, Neale stepped to the window. The man inside was busy selling tickets and tossing the money taken in to an assistant, who sorted and counted it.

"How many?" asked the man in the ticket wagon, hardly looking up.

"Seven—two of 'em halves," answered Neale quickly.

"Well, where's the money—where's the cash?" asked the cashier rather snappily, and then, for the first time, he looked up. A queer change came over his face as he recognized Neale.

"Well, for the love of alligators!" he exclaimed, thrusting forth his hand. "When'd you get on the lot?"

"Just arrived," answered Neale with a smile. "Got some friends of mine here who want to see the show."

"Surest thing you know!" cried the cashier. "How many'd you say? Seven—two halves? Here you are," and he flipped the tickets down on the wooden shelf in front of him. "Are you coming back to join the outfit?" he went on. "We could bill 'Master Jakeway's' act very nicely now,

I imagine. Only," and he chuckled, "we'd have to drop the 'Master.' You've got beyond that."

"No, I'm not coming back," answered Neale. "That isn't saying I wouldn't like to, perhaps. But I have other plans. I've heard that my father has returned from the Klondike, and I want to see my uncle to find if he has any news. Is he around—Uncle Bill, I mean?"

"Yes, he was talking to me a while ago. And I did hear him mention, some time back, that he had news of your father. Well, well! I am glad to see you again, Neale. Stop in and see me after the show."

"I'll try to," was the answer.

Hank, being given his ticket, went away by himself, and, after greeting some more of his circus friends, Neale began a search for his uncle. It was not an easy matter to locate any of the circus men on the "lot" at an hour just before the performance was to begin. And Tess and Dot were eager to go in and see the animals, the side shows, the main performance and everything else.

"I'd better take them in," Ruth said finally. "You can join us later, Neale, you and Mr. Howbridge."

So this plan was agreed on, and then the two eager girls were led into the tents of childish mystery and delight, while Neale and the lawyer sought the proprietor of the show.

They found him talking to Sully Sorber, the

clown, who was just going in to put on his make-up.

At first Uncle Bill just stared at Neale, as though hardly believing the evidence of his eyes. Then a welcoming smile spread over his face, and he held out his hand.

"Well! Well! This is a coincidence!" exclaimed the ringmaster. "I was just figuring with Sully here if we would get any nearer Milton than this, as I wanted to have a talk with you, and now here you are! How did it happen? Glad to see you, sir," and he shook hands with Mr. Howbridge. "I've been going to answer your letters, but I've been so busy I haven't had time. One of the elephants got loose and wrecked a farmer's barn, and I've had a damage suit to settle. But I am glad to see you both."

"Tell me!" exclaimed Neale eagerly. "Have you any news from father? Is he back from the Klondike? Where can I find him?"

"My! you're as bad as ever for asking questions," chuckled Mr. Bill Sorber. "But there! I know how it is! Yes, Neale, I have some real news, though there isn't much of it. I never see such a man as your father for not sending word direct. But maybe he did, and it miscarried. Anyhow, I've been trying to get in touch with him ever since I got your letter, Mr. Howbridge," he went on speaking to the lawyer.

"Yes, your father has come back from the Klon-

dike," he resumed to Neale. "He put in his time to good advantage there, I hear, and made some money. Then he set out for the States, and, in an indirect way, I learned that he is located in Trumbull."

"Trumbull? Where's that?" asked Neale eagerly.

"It's a small town on Lake Macopic!" answered the circus man.

Neale and the lawyer looked at one another in surprise.

"Do you know the place?" went on the ringmaster. "I must confess I don't. I tried to look it up to see if it was worth moving there with the show, but I couldn't even find it on the map. So it must be pretty small."

"I don't know exactly where it is," the lawyer said. "But the fact of the matter is that we are on our way to Lake Macopic in a houseboat, and it is quite a coincidence that Neale's father should be there. Can you give us any further particulars?"

"Well, not many," confessed Mr. Sorber. "Mr. O'Neil isn't much more on letter writing than I am, and that isn't saying much. But my information is to the effect that he had to go there to clear up some dispute he and his mining partner had. He was in with some men in the Klondike, and when it came to a settlement of the gold they had dug out there was a dispute, I believe. One of the men lived in Trumbull, and your father,

Neale, had to go there to settle the matter. But I am glad to see you!'' he went on to the former circus lad. ''And after the show, which is about to begin, we can have a long talk, and then—''

At that moment a loud shouting arose from the neighborhood of the animal tent. Mingled with the cries of the men was a peculiar sound, like that of some queer whistle, or trumpet.

''There goes Minnie again!'' cried Mr. Bill Sorber. ''She's broken loose!'' and he ran off at top speed while other circus employees followed, the shouting and trumpeting increasing in volume.

CHAPTER XVI

RUTH'S ALARM

"MINNIE'S loose!" cried Neale to Mr. Howbridge after the flight of the circus men. "Minnie is one of the worst elephants in captivity! She's always making trouble, and breaking loose. I imagine she's the one that wrecked the farmer's barn Uncle Bill was telling about. If she's on the rampage in the animal tent it means mischief!"

"An elephant loose!" cried Mr. Howbridge. "And Ruth and the children in the tent! Come on, Neale!" he cried. "Hurry!"

But there was no need to urge Neale to action. He was off on the run, and Mr. Howbridge showed that he was not nearly so old and grave as he sometimes appeared, for he ran swiftly after his more youthful companion.

The shouting continued, and the trumpet calls of the angry or frightened elephant mingled with them. Then, as Neale and Mr. Howbridge came within view of the animal tent, they saw bursting from it a huge elephant, followed by several men holding to ropes attached to the "ponderous pachyderm," as Minnie was called on the show

bills. She was pulling a score of circus hands after her, as though they were so many stuffed straw men.

Mr. Bill Sorber at this time reached the scene, and with him were several men who had hurried after him when they heard the alarm. The ringmaster seemed to know just what to do. He caught an ankus, or elephant hook, from one of his helpers, and, taking a stand directly in the path of the onrushing Minnie, he raised the sharp instrument threateningly.

On thundered the elephant, but Mr. Sorber stood his ground. Men shouted a warning to him, and the screams and cries of women and children rose shrilly on the air. Minnie, which was the rather peaceful name for a very wild elephant, raised her trunk in the air, and from it came the peculiar trumpet blasts. The men she was pulling along were dragged over the ground helplessly.

"Can he stop her, Neale?" gasped Mr. Howbridge, as he ran beside the former circus boy.

"Well, I've seem him stop a wild lion that got out of its cage," was the answer. "But an elephant—"

And then a strange thing happened. When within a few feet of the brave, resolute man who stood in her path, Minnie began to go more slowly. Her shrill cries were less insistent, and the men being dragged along after her began to hold back as they regained their feet.

Mr. Sorber raised the ankus on high. Its sharp, curved point gleamed in the sun. Minnie saw it, and she knew it could cruelly hurt her sensitive trunk. More than once she had felt it before, when on one of her rampages. She did not want to suffer again.

And so, when so close that she could have reached out and touched the ringmaster with her elongated nose, or, if so minded, she could have curled it around him and hurled him to death—when this close, the elephant stopped, and grew quiet.

"Minnie! Minnie!" said the man in a soothing voice. "Behave yourself, Minnie! Why are you acting in this way? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

And the elephant really seemed to be. She lowered her trunk, flapped her ears slowly to and fro, and then stood in her tracks and began swaying to and fro in the manner characteristic of the big beasts.

Mr. Sorber went up to her, tossing the ankus to one of his men, and began to pat the trunk which curled up as if in anticipation of a treat.

"Minnie, you're a bad girl, and you oughtn't to have any; but since you stopped when I told you to I'll give you a few," said the ringmaster, and, reaching into his pocket, he took out some peanuts which the big animal munched with every appearance of satisfaction.

"She's all right now," said Neale's uncle, as the regular elephant men came up to take charge of the creature. "She was just a little excited, that's all. How did it happen?"

"Oh, the same as usual," replied Minnie's keeper. "All at once she gave a trumpet, yanked her stakes loose, and set off out of the animal tent. I had some ropes on her ready to have her pull one of the wagons, and we grabbed these—as many of us as could—but we couldn't hold her."

"I'm afraid we'll have to get rid of Minnie, she's too uncertain. Doesn't seem to know her own mind, like a lot of the women folks," and Mr. Sorber smiled at Mr. Howbridge.

"You were very brave to stop her as you did," observed the lawyer.

"Oh, well, it's my business," said the animal man. "It wasn't such a risk as it seemed. I was all ready to jump to one side if she hadn't stopped."

"I wonder if any one in the animal tent was hurt," went on the lawyer. "We must go and see, Neale. Ruth and the others—"

"I hope none of your folks were injured," broke in Mr. Sorber. "Minnie has done damage in the past, but I guess she only just ran away this time."

With anxious hearts Neale and Mr. Howbridge hastened to the animal tent, but their fears were groundless. Minnie had carefully avoided

every one in her rush, and, as a matter of fact, Ruth, Agnes, Dot and Tess were in the main tent when the elephant ran out. They heard the excitement, but Ruth quieted her sisters.

"Well, now we'll go on with the show," said Mr. Sorber, when matters had settled to their normal level. "I'll see you afterward, Neale, and you too, Mr. Howbridge, and those delightful little ladies from the old Corner House."

"Oh, Uncle Bill, I almost forgot!" cried the boy. "Have you that trick mule yet—Uncle Josh? The one I taught to play dead?"

"Uncle Josh? No, I haven't got him, but I wish I had," said the circus owner. "One of the stablemen took him away—stole him in fact—and I'd give a hundred dollars to get him back!"

Neale held out his hand, smiling.

"What do you mean?" asked his uncle.

"Pay me the hundred dollars," was the answer. "I have Uncle Josh!"

"No! Really, have you?"

"I have! I thought you hadn't sold him!" exclaimed the boy, and he told the story of the man on the towpath.

"Well, that is good news!" exclaimed Mr. Sorber. "I'll send for Uncle Josh right away. I sure am glad to have him back. He was always good for a lot of laughs. He's almost as funny as Sully, the clown."

A few minutes later Neale and Mr. Howbridge joined Ruth and the others in the main tent.

Tess and Dot especially enjoyed the performance very much. They took in everything from the "grand entry" to the races and concert at the end. They were guests of the show, in fact, Neale having procured complimentary tickets.

When the performance was over, they visited "Uncle Bill" in his own private tent, and the Corner House girls had a glimpse of circus life "behind the scenes," as it were, Tess's first experience of the sort.

Neale met many of his old friends and they all expressed the hope that he would soon find his father. Uncle Josh, the trick mule, was brought to the grounds by Hank, and the animal seemed glad to be again among his companions.

"Will you be back again this evening?" asked Neale's uncle, when the time came for the party to go back to the houseboat for supper.

"I think not," was Neale's answer.

He said good-by to his uncle, arranging to write to him and hear from him as often as needful. And then they left the circus lot where the night performance would soon be given.

"Well, I have real news of father at last," said Neale to Agnes, as he went back toward the canal with his friends. "I would like to know, though, if he got rich out in the Klondike."

"If he wants any money he can have half mine!" offered Dot. "I have eighty-seven cents in my bank, and I was going to save up to buy my Alice-doll a new carriage. But you can have my money for your father, Neale."

"Thank you," replied Neale, without a smile at Dot's offer. "Maybe I shan't need it, but it's very kind of you."

Mrs. MacCall had supper ready soon after they arrived at the boat, and then, as the smaller girls were tired from their day at the circus, they went to bed early, while Ruth and Mr. Howbridge, Agnes and Neale sat out on the deck and talked. As they were not to go on again until morning, Hank was allowed to go back to the circus again. He said seeing it twice in one day was not too much for him.

"I do hope you will find your father, Neale," said Agnes softly, as, just before eleven o'clock, they all went to bed.

But Ruth, at least, did not go to sleep at once. In her bosom she carried the letter she had received from Luke, and this she now read carefully, twice.

Luke was doing well at the summer hotel. The proprietor was sick, so he and the head clerk and a night man had their hands full. He was earning good money, and part of this he was going to spend on his education and the rest he intended to save. He was sorry he could not be with the

houseboat party and hoped they would all have a good time. Then he added a page or more intended only for Ruth's eyes. The letter made the oldest Corner House girl very happy.

Soon after breakfast the next morning they were under way again. The circus had left town in the night, and Neale did not know when he would see his uncle again. But the lad's heart beat high with hope that he might soon find his father.

The weather was propitious, and hours of sunshine were making the Corner House girls as brown as Indians. Mr. Howbridge, too, took on a coat of tan. As for Neale, his light hair looked lighter than ever against his tanned skin. And Hank, from walking along the towpath, became almost as dark as a negro.

One morning, Ruth, coming down to the kitchen to help Mrs. MacCall with the dinner, saw two fat, chubby legs sticking out of a barrel in one corner of the cabin.

The legs were vigorously kicking, and from the depths of the barrel came muffled cries of:

"Let me out! Help me out! Pull me up!"

Ruth lost no time in doing the latter, and, after an effort, succeeded in pulling right side up her sister Tess.

"What in the world were you doing?" demanded Ruth.

"I was scraping down in the bottom of the bar-

rel to get a little flour that was left," Tess explained, very red in the face. "But I leaned over too far and I couldn't get up. And I couldn't call at first."

"What did you want of flour?" asked Ruth. "Goodness, you have enough on your dress, anyhow."

"I wanted some to rub on my face to make me look pale," went on Tess.

"To make you look pale! Gracious, Tess! what for?"

"We're playing doctor and nurse, Dot and I," Tess explained. "I have to be sick, and sick people are always pale. But I'm so tanned Dot said I didn't look sick at all, so I tried to scrape some flour off the bottom of the barrel to rub on my face."

"Well, you have enough now if you brush off what's on your clothes," laughed Ruth.

"And be careful about leaning over barrels," put in Mrs. MacCall. "You might have been hurt."

"Yes," agreed Tess, "I might be but I wasn't. Only my head felt funny and my legs felt queer, too, when I wiggled them.

They were approaching the end of the stretch of the canal through which they must travel to reach Gentory River. The boat would be "locked" from the canal to the larger stream, and then Neale

could have his wish of operating the motor come true.

Toward evening they arrived at the last lock of their trip. Just beyond lay the river, and they would proceed up that to Lake Macopic.

As the *Bluebird* emerged from the lock and slowly floated on the little basin into which just there the Gentory broadened, the attention of Ruth and Agnes was directed to a small motor boat which was just leaving the vicinity.

Ruth, who stood nearest the rail, grasped her sister by the arm, and cried an alarm.

"Look! Those men! In the boat!" exclaimed Ruth.

"What about them?" asked Agnes, while Mr. Howbridge glanced at the two sisters.

"They're the same men who robbed us!" exclaimed Ruth. "The men who took our jewelry box in the rain! Oh, stop them!"

CHAPTER XVII

UP THE RIVER

NEALE O'NEIL, who had been steering the houseboat during the operation of locking it from the canal into the river, sprang away from the tiller toward the side of the craft at Ruth's cries. There was no immediate need of guiding the *Bluebird* for the moment, as she was floating idly with the momentum gained when she was slowly pulled from the lock basin.

"Are those the men?" asked Neale, pointing to two roughly dressed characters in a small motor boat.

"I'm sure they are!" asserted Ruth. "That one steering is the man who grabbed the box from me. Look, Agnes, don't you remember them?"

Mr. Howbridge, who heard what was said, acted promptly. On the towpath, near the point where the river entered the canal through the lock, was Hank Dayton with the two mules, the services of which would no longer be needed.

"Hank! Hank! Stop those men!" cried the lawyer.

The driver dropped his reins, and sprang to the edge of the bank. Near him was a rowboat, empty

at the time, and with the oars in the locks. It was the work of but a moment for Hank to spring in and shove off, and then he began rowing hard.

But of course he stood no chance against a motor boat. The two men in the gasolene craft turned on more power. The explosions came more rapidly and drowned the shouts of those on the houseboat. Hank soon gave up his useless effort, and turned back to shore, while Ruth and Agnes, leaning over the side of the rail, gazed at the fast-disappearing men.

"There must be some way of stopping them!" cried Mr. Howbridge, who was quite excited. "Isn't there a motor boat around here—a police boat or something? Neale, can't you get up steam and take after them?"

"The *Bluebird* could never catch that small boat," answered the boy. "And there doesn't seem to be anything else around here now, except rowboats and canalers."

This was true, and those on board the *Bluebird* had to suffer the disappointment of seeing the men fade away in the distance.

"But something must be done!" insisted the lawyer. "An alarm must be given. The police must be notified. Where's the keeper of the lock? He may know these ruffians, and where they are staying. We must do something!"

"Well, they're getting away for the time being," murmured Neale, as he gazed up the river

on which the motor boat was now hardly discernible as it was turning a bend. "But we're going the same way, and we may come across them. Are you sure, Ruth, that these are the same men who robbed you?"

"Positive!" declared the girl. "Aren't you, Agnes?"

"No, I can't be sure," answered her sister with a shake of her head. "The men looked just as rough—and just as ugly—as the two who attacked us. But it was raining so hard, and we were in the doorway, and the umbrella was giving such trouble—no, Ruth," she added, "I couldn't be *sure.*"

"But I am!" declared the oldest Kenway girl. "I had a good look at the face of at least one of the men in the boat, and I know it was he who took my box! Oh, if I could only get it back I wouldn't care what became of the men!"

"It ought to be an easy matter to trace them," said the lawyer. "Their motor boat must be registered and licensed, as ours must be. We can trace them through that, I think. Neale, would you know the men if you saw them again?"

"I might," answered the boy. "I didn't have a very good look at them, though. They both had their backs toward me, and their hats were pulled down over their faces. As Ruth says, however, they looked rough and desperate."

"We must take some action," declared the law-

yer, with his characteristic energy. "The authorities must be notified and that motor boat traced. We shall have to stop here to register our own craft and get a license, and it will give us an opportunity to make some inquiries."

"Meanwhile those men will get away!" exclaimed Ruth. "And we'll never get our jewelry back. If we could get mother's ring," she added, "it wouldn't be so bad."

"They can't get very far away if they stick to the river," said Mr. Howbridge. "The river flows into Lake Macopic and there is no outlet from that. If we have to pursue the men all the way to the lake we'll do it."

"Well, then let's get busy," suggested Neale. "The sooner we have our boat registered and licensed, the sooner we can start after those men. Of course we can't catch them, for their boat goes so much faster than ours. But we can trace them."

"I hope we can," murmured Ruth, gazing up the river, on which there was now no trace of the boat containing the rough men. "We have two quests, now," she added. "Looking for our jewelry box, and your father, Neale. And I hope we find your father, whether I get back my things or not—anything but the ring."

"Let us hope we get both," said the boy.

Then followed a busy hour. Certain formalities had to be gone through with, in order to en-

able the *Bluebird* to make the voyage on the river and lake. Her motor was inspected and passed. Neale had seen to it that the machinery was in good shape.

Mr. Howbridge came back from the boat registry office with the necessary permit and license, and Ruth asked him:

"Did you find out anything about the men?"

"No one here knows them," he said. "They were never here before, and they came only to get some supplies. It appears they are camping on one of the islands in Lake Macopic."

"Was their boat registered?" asked Neale.

"Yes. At least it is presumed so. But as we did not see the number on it we can give the authorities no clue. Motor boats up here don't have to carry their number plates in such large size as autos do. That craft was not registered at this office, but it was, very likely, granted a permit at the office at the other end of the river or on the lake. So we can only keep on and hope either to overtake the men or to get a trace of them in some other way."

"We can never overtake them if they keep going as fast as they did when they left here," said Agnes.

"They won't keep that speed up," declared Neale. "But we had better get started. We'll be under our own power now, and can travel whenever we like, night or day."

"Are we going to take the mules with us—and Mr. Hank?" asked Dot, hugging her "Alice-doll."

"Hank is going to accompany us," said Mr. Howbridge. "But we'll leave the mules behind, having no place for them on the *Bluebird.* I think I will dispose of them, for I probably shall not go on a vacation along the canal again."

"But it was a delightful and novel one," said Ruth.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," her guardian remarked. "It would have been little pleasure to me—this trip—if you young folks had not enjoyed it."

"I just love it! And the best part is yet to come!" cried Agnes, with sparkling eyes. "I want to see the islands in the lake."

"And I want to get to Trumbull and see if my father is there," added Neale. "I think I'll send him a letter. I'll mail it here. It won't take but a moment."

"You don't know his address," said Agnes.

"I'll send it just to Trumbull," said the boy. "Post-office people are sharks at finding people."

He wrote the note while the final preparations were being made for leaving on the trip up the river. Mrs. MacCall had attended to the buying of food, which was all that was needed.

And then, after Neale had sent his letter to the

post-office, he went down in the engine room of the *Bluebird.*

"Are we all ready?" he called up to Mr. Howbridge, who was going to steer until Neale could come up on deck after the motor had been started.

"All ready!" answered Ruth.

Neale turned the flywheel over, there was a cough and a splutter, and then a steady chug-chugging.

"Oh, we're going! We're going!" gayly cried Tess and Dot. Almost anything satisfied them as long as they were in motion.

"Yes, we're on our way," said Mr. Howbridge, giving the wheel a turn and sending the houseboat out into the stream.

The trip up the Gentory River was no less delightful than the voyage on the canal had been, if one may call journeying on such a quiet stream a voyage. It was faster travel, of course, with the motor sending the *Bluebird* along.

"The only thing is, though," said Hank, who sat near the wheel with Neale, "I haven't anything to do. I miss the mules."

"Oh, I guess there'll be enough to do. Especially when we get up on the lake. You'll have to help manage the boat," remarked Neale. "I hear they have pretty good storms on Macopic."

"They do," confirmed Hank.

They motored along until dusk that evening, and then, as their way led for a time through a part

of the stream where many craft navigate, it was decided to tie up for the night. It passed without incident, and they were on their way again the next morning.

It was calculated that the trip on the river would take three days, but an accident to the motor the second day delayed them, and they were more likely to be five than three days. However, they did not mind the wait.

The break occurred on a lonely part of the stream, and after stopping the craft and tying up, Neale announced, after an examination, that he and Hank could make the needful repairs.

"We'll start in the morning," said the boy.

"Then we'll just go ashore and walk about a little," suggested Ruth, and soon she and her sisters and Mr. Howbridge were on the bank of the beautiful stream.

The twilight lingered long that night, and it was light enough to see some distance ahead as Ruth and the others strolled on. The river bank turned and, following it beneath the trees, the party suddenly heard voices seemingly coming from a secluded cove where the stream formed an eddy.

"Must be fishermen in there," said Mr. Howbridge. "We had better not disturb them."

As they were turning away the voices became louder, and then on the still night air there came an exclamation.

"I don't care what you think!" a man's voice shouted. "Just because you've been in the Klondike doesn't give you the right to boss me! You'll give me an even half of the swag or—"

And then it sounded as though a hand had been clapped suddenly over the speaker's mouth.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE NIGHT ALARM

Mr. Howbridge and Ruth quickly looked at one another. The same thought and suspicion came in each of their minds at the same time.

"Who's that?" Dot asked, she and Tess having lingered behind the others to pick some flowers from the bank of the stream.

"Hush, children," cautioned Ruth in a whisper. "We must not disturb the—fishermen."

She added the last word after a look at her guardian. No further sound came from the cove where the voice had been uttering a protest and had been so suddenly hushed.

"Oh, look at those big red flowers! I'm going to get some of those!" cried Dot, darting off to one side. "My Alice-doll loves red flowers" she added.

"I'll get some, too," said Agnes. "Mrs. MacCall also loves red flowers, though she says there's nothing prettier than 'Heeland hither' as she calls it."

"Oh, yes, we'll get her some, and she'll have a bouquet for the table," assented Dot. "And then maybe she'll let us have a little play party for

Alice-doll to-morrow, and we can have things to eat."

"Oh, you're always thinking of your old Alice-doll!" complained Tess. "You'd think all the play parties and all this trip were just for her, and the things to eat, too."

"We can eat the things Mrs. MacCall gives us —if she gives us any," corrected Dot. "Come on, help me get the flowers."

"Oh, all right, I will," said Tess. "But you know, Dot Kenway, that Ruthie will give us anything we want for a party."

As the two little girls darted toward the clump of gay blossoms Ruth called:

"Be careful. It may be swampy around here."

"I'll look after them," offered Agnes, "and you and Mr. Howbridge can go see if those men—"

She did not finish her sentence, which she had begun in a whisper, but nodded in the direction of the clump of trees, around the eddy of the river. It was from there the stifled exclamation had come.

"Yes, I think it would be a good plan to take a look there," said Mr. Howbridge to Ruth in a low voice. "Especially if the children are out of the way. I don't suppose it could by any chance be the same men, but—"

"Look!" suddenly exclaimed Ruth, pointing to something moving behind a screen of bushes that

hung over the river near the eddy. As she spoke the bushes parted and a motor boat shoved her bow out into the stream. In another instant the boat came fully into view, and there was revealed as occupants two roughly dressed men. They gave one quick glance along the bank toward Ruth and Mr. Howbridge, and then while one attended to the wheel the other sprang to the engine to increase the speed.

There was a nervous spluttering from the motor, and the boat shot out into the river, the two men in her crouching down as though they feared being fired at.

"There they are!" cried Ruth, clasping Mr. Howbridge's arm in her excitement. "The same two men!"

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Well, they're the same two we saw down near the canal lock, in the boat," Ruth went on. "I'm sure it's the same boat, and I'm as positive as I ever was that they are the ones who robbed us."

"It is the same boat we saw the other day," agreed the lawyer. "And I think the same men. Whether they are the thieves is, of course, open to question. But I should very much like to question them," he added. "Hold on there!" he called to the men. "I want to see you!"

But the boat did not stop, rather she increased her speed, and it seemed that one of the men laughed. They did not look back.

"I wish there was some way of taking after them!" exclaimed Ruth's guardian. "But, as it is, it's out of the question."

They were on a lonely part of the river. No houses were near and there was no other boat in sight, not even a leaky skiff, though some farmer boy might have one hidden along the shore under the bushes. But a rowing craft would not have been effective against the speedy motor boat, and finding another craft to match the one containing the two rough men was out of the question.

Farther and farther away the men were speeding now. Agnes and the two younger girls, having heard the shouts of Mr. Howbridge, turned back from their flower-gathering trip.

"Is anything the matter?" asked Agnes.

"Oh, no, nothing much. Mr. Howbridge saw two men in that boat," answered Ruth, with a meaning look at her sister. "But they did not stop." And when she had a chance, after Dot and Tess had moved out of hearing distance, Ruth added: "They're the same men, Agnes!"

"You mean the ones who robbed us?"

"I'm pretty sure; yes!"

"Oh dear!" voiced Agnes, and she looked around the now darkening woods. "I wish we hadn't stopped in such a lonely place," she murmured.

"Nonsense!" laughed Mr. Howbridge. "I

shall begin to think you doubt my ability as guardian. My physical, not my mental," he added.

"Oh, no, it isn't that," Agnes made haste to say. "Only—"

"And we have Neale, and Hank, too," broke in Ruth. "While Mrs. MacCall is a tower of strength herself, even if she is getting old."

"Oh, yes, I know," murmured Agnes. "But—well, don't let's talk about it," she finished. "And I think we'd better be going back. It will soon be quite dark."

"Yes," agreed the lawyer. "We had better go back."

He looked up the river. The boat containing the two rough men was no longer in sight, but finally there drifted down on the night wind the soft put-put of the motor.

"We thought you had deserted us," said Neale when he saw, from the deck of the *Bluebird,* the lawyer and the girls returning.

"We went farther than we intended," answered Ruth.

"How's the motor?" asked the lawyer.

"Hank and I will have it fixed in the morning."

"Where is Hank now?" Agnes wanted to know, and it seemed as though she had begun to rely on the rugged and rough strength of the man who had driven the mules.

"Oh, he went off for a walk, and he said maybe

he'd fish a while," Neale said. "He's a bug on fishing."

Then, while Mrs. MacCall took charge of Tess and Dot, giving exclamations of delight at the flowers, even while comparing them with her Highland heather, Agnes and Ruth told Neale what had happened—the swift-departure of the motor boat and its two occupants.

"They were evidently having a dispute when we came along," said Ruth. "We heard one of them say something about the Klondike."

"The Klondike!" exclaimed Neale, and there was a queer note in his voice.

"Yes, they certainly said that," agreed Agnes. "Oh, I do wish we were away from here." And from the deck of the boat she looked at the wooded shores of the river extending on either side of the moored craft. The Gentory was not very wide at this point, but the other shore was just as lonely and deserted as that where the voyagers had come to rest for the night.

"Don't be so nervous and fussy," said Ruth to Agnes. "Mr. Howbridge won't like it. He will think we don't care for the trip, and—"

"Oh, I like the trip all right," broke in Agnes. "It's just the idea of staying all night in this lonely place."

"We have plenty of protectors," asserted Ruth. "There's Neale and—"

"What's that?" asked the boy, hearing his name spoken.

"Agnes was saying she was timid," went on Ruth, for Mr. Howbridge had gone to the dining-room for a glass of milk Mrs. MacCall had suggested he take before going to bed. "I tell her with you and Mr. Howbridge and Hank to protect us—"

"Aggie timid! Oh, yes, we'll look after you!" he promised with a laugh. "At the same time —Oh, well, I guess Hank won't stay late," and he looked at his watch.

"You seem worried," said Agnes to her friend when they were alone for a moment. "Do you think these men—those Klondikers—are likely to make trouble?"

"No, not exactly that," Neale answered. "To tell you the truth I was thinking of Hank. I may as well tell you," he went on. "I didn't see any connection between the two happenings before, but since you mentioned those men there may be."

"What are you driving at?" asked Agnes, in surprise.

"Just this—" answered Neale. "But let's call Ruth." Ruth came and then Neale continued: "Hank suddenly dropped his tools when we were working over the motor and said he was going for a walk. He also mentioned fishing. I didn't think much of it at the time, for he may be odd

that way when it comes to a steady job. But now I begin to think he may have gone off to meet those men."

"But he didn't meet them," Ruth said. "We saw them speed away in motor boat alone."

"They may have met Hank later," the boy said.

"But what makes you suspicious of him?" Ruth asked.

"I'll tell you." And Neale related the episode of the gold ring.

"Oh, do you think it could be one of ours that the men took? Do you think Hank is in with them, and wants his share of the 'swag' as one man called it?" questioned Agnes eagerly.

"I don't know, I'm sure," answered Neale. "But he certainly had a ring. It rolled to the deck and he picked it up quickly enough."

"Say, Ruthie!" exclaimed Agnes impulsively, "now's a good chance while he's away. We could look through the place where he keeps what few things he has—in that curtained off corner by his cot."

Ruth shook her head.

"I'd rather not," she remarked. "I couldn't bear to do that. I'd much rather accuse him openly. But we won't even do that now. We'll just watch and wait, and we won't even tell Mr. Howbridge until we are more sure of our ground."

"All right," agreed Neale and Agnes after they had talked it over at some length.

It was agreed that they should all three keep their eyes on Hank, and note whether there were any further suspicious happenings.

"Of course you want to be careful of one thing," remarked Neale, as the three talked it over.

"What is that?" questioned Agnes quickly.

"You don't want that mule driver to suspect that you are watching him. If he did suspect it he'd be more careful to hide his doings than ever."

"We won't let him suspect us, Neale," declared Ruth.

"Of course he may be as innocent as they make 'em, and on the other hand he may be as deep as——"

"The deep blue sea," finished Agnes.

"Exactly."

"He certainly doesn't appear very deep," remarked Ruth. "He looks rather simple minded."

"But sometimes those simple looking customers are the deepest," declared the youth. "I know we had that sort join the circus sometimes. You had to watch 'em every minute." And there the talk came to an end.

The mule driver came along some time later. He had a goodly string of fish. Agnes was asleep, but Ruth heard him putting them in the ice box.

She heard Neale speak to the man, and then, gradually, the *Bluebird* became quiet.

"Well, he got fish, at any rate," Ruth reasoned as she turned over to go to sleep. "I hope he has no connection with those robbers. And yet, why should he hide a ring? Oh, I wonder if we shall ever see our things and mother's wedding ring again."

Ruth was too much of a philosopher to let this keep her awake. There was a slight feeling of timidity, as was natural, but she made herself conquer this.

Finally Ruth dozed off.

How long she slept she did not know, but she was suddenly awakened by hearing a scream. It was the high-pitched voice of a child, and after her first start Ruth knew it came from Tess.

"Oh, don't let him get me! Don't let him get me!" cried the little girl.

CHAPTER XIX

ON THE LAKE

INSTANTLY Ruth was out of bed, and while she slipped on her bath robe and while her bare feet sought her slippers under the edge of her bunk, she cried:

"What is it, Tessie? Ruth is coming! Sister is coming!"

At once the interior of the *Bluebird* seemed to pulsate with life. In the corridor which ran the length of the craft, and on either side of which the sleeping apartments were laid off, a night light burned. Opening her door Ruth saw Mrs. MacCall peering forth, a flaring candle in her hand.

"What is it, lass?" asked the sturdy Scotch woman. "I thought I heard a wee cry in the night."

"You did!" exclaimed Ruth. "It was Tess!"

In quick succession, with kimonas or robes over their sleeping garments, Neale, Mr. Howbridge and Agnes came from their rooms. But from the apartments of Tess and Dot no one came, and ominous quiet reigned.

"What was it?" asked Mr. Howbridge. "One of you girls screamed. Who was it?"

Something gleamed in his hand, and Ruth knew it to be a weapon.

"It was Tess who cried out!" Ruth answered. "All I could hear was something about her being afraid some one would catch her."

And then again from the room of Tess came a low cry of:

"Ruthie! Ruthie! Come here!"

"Yes, dear, I am coming," was the soothing reply. "What is it? Oh, my dear, what has happened?"

When she opened the door she saw her sister sitting up in bed, a look of fear on her face but unharmed. And a quick look in the adjoining apartment showed Dot to be peacefully slumbering, her "Alice-doll" close clasped in her arms.

"What was it, Tessie?" asked Ruth in a whisper, carefully closing Dot's door so as not to awaken her. "What did you see?"

"I—I don't just remember," was the answer. "I was dreaming that I was riding on that funny Uncle Josh mule that knows Neale, and then a clown chased me and I fell off and the elephant came after me. I called to you, and—"

"Was it all only a dream, dear?" askec Ruth with a smile.

"No, it wasn't all a dream," said Tess slowly. "A man looked in the window at me."

"What window?" asked Agnes.

Tess pointed to one of the two small casements in her small apartment. They opened on the bank of the river, and it would have been easy for any one passing along the bank of the stream to have looked into Tess's windows, or, for that matter, into any of the openings on that side of the craft. But the windows, though open on account of the warm night, were protected by heavy screens to keep out mosquitoes and other insects.

"Do you really mean some one opened your window in the night, or did you just dream that, too?" asked Ruth. "You have very vivid dreams sometimes."

"I didn't dream about the *man,*" insisted Tess. "He really opened the screen and looked in. See, it's loose now!"

The screens swung outward on hinges, and there, plainly enough, the screen of one of the casements in Tess's room was partly open.

"Perhaps the wind blew it," suggested Agnes, wishing she could believe this.

Neale stepped over and tested the screen.

"It seems too stiff to have been blown open by the wind," was the comment.

"But of course," Mr. Howbridge suggested, "the screen may not have been tightly closed when Theresa went to bed."

"Oh, yes it was, sir!" exclaimed Mrs. MacCall positively. "I looked at them myself. I didn't

want any of the mosquitoes to be eatin' ma pretties. The screens were tight closed!"

"Oh dear, I don't like it here!" said Tess, on the verge of tears. "I don't want tramps looking in my room, and this man was just like a tramp."

The noise of some one moving around on the upper deck of the craft attracted the attention of all.

"That's Hank!" exclaimed Neale. "I'll go and see if he heard anything unusual or saw any one. It may be that some fellow was passing along the river road and was impudent enough to pull open a screen and look in, thinking he might pick up something off a shelf."

But Hank, who in his curtained-off place had been awakened by the confusion below him, declared he had seen or heard nothing.

"I'm a sound sleeper," he said. "Once I get to bed I don't do much else but sleep."

So nothing was to be got out of him.

And it was difficult to tell whether or not Tess had dreamed about the man, as she had said she dreamed about the elephant and the mule. Neale volunteered to look on the bank underneath the window for a sign of footprints. He did look, using his flashlight, but discovered nothing.

"I guess it was all a dream," said Ruth. "Go to sleep, Tess dear. You'll be all right now."

"I'm not going to sleep alone," insisted

the little girl, her lips beginning to quiver.

"I'll stay with you," offered Ruth, and so it was arranged.

"It's an awful queer happening," remarked Agnes.

"Lots of things seem queer on this trip," put in Tess. "Maybe we better give up the house-boat trip."

"You won't say that in the morning," laughed Neale.

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, I know," the boy laughed.

They all went back to their beds, but it was some time before several of them resumed their interrupted slumbers. Tess, the innocent cause of it all, fell off to dreamland with Ruth's arm around her in the rather cramped quarters, for the bunks were not intended to accommodate two. But once Tess was breathing deeply and regularly, Ruth slipped back to her own apartment, pausing to whisper to Agnes that Tess seemed all right now.

Ruth remained awake for some time, her mind busy with many things, and mingled with her confused thoughts were visions of the mule driver, Hank Dayton, signaling to some tramp confederates in the woods the fact that all on board the *Bluebird* were deep in slumber, so that robbery might be easily committed.

"Oh, but I'm foolish to think such things," the

Corner House girl told herself. "Absolutely foolish!"

And at last she convinced herself of that and went to sleep.

The next morning Neale and Mr. Howbridge, with Hank to help, made a careful examination of the soft earth on the river bank under Tess's window. They saw many footprints, and the stub of a cigarette.

But the footprints might have been made by themselves when they had moored the boat the evening before. As for the cigarette stub, though Hank smoked, he said he never used cigarettes. A pipe was his favorite, and neither Mr. Howbridge nor Neale smoked.

"Some one passing in the daytime before we arrived may have flung the stub away," said the lawyer. "I think all we can do is to ascribe the alarm to a dream Tess had."

The little girl had forgotten much of the occurrence of the night when questioned about it next morning. She hardly recalled her dream, but she did insist that a man had looked in her window.

"Well, next time we tie up over night we'll do it in or near some city or village, and not in such a lonely place," decided Mr. Howbridge.

Neale and Hank made good their promise to repair the motor, and shortly after breakfast the craft was in shape to travel on.

The weather continued fine, and if it had not

been for the alarm of the night before, and the shadow of the robbery hanging over Ruth and Agnes, and Neale's anxiety about his father, the travelers would have been in a most happy mood. The trip was certainly affording them many new experiences.

"It's almost as exciting as when we were snowbound," declared Agnes.

"But I'm glad we don't have to look for two little runaways or lost ones," put in Ruth, with a glance at Tess and Dot as they went out to play on the upper deck.

It was just before noon, when Ruth was helping Mrs. MacCall prepare the dinner, that the oldest Kenway girl heard a distressing cry from the upper deck where Tess and Dot had been playing all the morning.

"Tess, stop!" Ruth heard Dot exclaim. "I'm going to tell Ruthie on you! You'll drown her! Oh, Tess!"

"She can't drown! Haven't I got a string on her?" demanded Tess. "This is a new way of giving her a bath. She likes it."

"Give her to me! Ruthie! Ruthie! Make Tess stop!" pleaded Dot.

"I wonder what the matter is," said Ruth, as she set down the dish she was holding and hastened to the upper deck.

There she saw Dot and Tess both leaning over the rail, at rather a dangerous angle, and evidently

struggling, one to get possession of and the other to retain, some object Ruth could not see.

"Be careful! You'll fall in!" Ruth cried.

At the sound of her voice her sisters turned toward her, and Ruth saw they each had hold of a cord.

"What are you doing; fishing?" Ruth asked. "Don't you know Hank said you couldn't catch fish when the boat was moving unless you trolled with what he called a spoon?"

"We're not fishing!" said Dot.

"I'm just giving the Alice-doll a bath," explained Tess. "I tied her on the end of a string and I'm letting her swim in the water. She likes it!"

"She does not! And you must stop! And you must give her to me! Oh, Ruthie!" cried Dot, trying to pull the cord away from Tess. In an instant there was a struggle between the two little girls.

"Children! Children!" admonished Ruth, in perfect amazement at such behavior on the part of the gentle and considerate Tess. "I'm surprised at you! Tess, dear, give Dot her doll. You shouldn't have put her in water unless Dot allowed you to."

"Well, but she needed a bath!" insisted Tess. "She was dirty!"

"I know it, and I was going to give her a bath; but she has a cold and I was waiting till she got

over it!" explained Dot. "Tess, give me that string, and I'll pull my Alice-doll up!" she demanded.

The struggle was renewed, and Ruth was hastening across the deck to stop it by the force of more authority than mere words, when Neale, who was steering the craft, called out.

"There's the big water! We're at Lake Macopic now!"

Hardly had the echo of his words died away than Dot cried:

"There! Now look what you did! You let go the string and my Alice-doll is gone!"

CHAPTER XX

DRIFTING

Dot burst into tears, and Tess, startled by the sudden tragic outcome of her prank, leaned so far over the edge of the boat to see what happened to the doll that Ruth cried:

"Be careful! You'll fall! Don't you go into the lake, as well as the doll!"

Tess bounced back on deck. She looked ashamed when she saw Dot crying.

"You can have one of my dolls when we get back home," Tess offered. "Or you can have my half of Almira the cat, and all her kittens. I'll give you my share."

"I don't want 'em! I want my Alice-doll!" wailed Dot.

"I'll have Hank get her for you!" called Neale, as he swung the boat around. "The string will float, even if your doll won't, and Hank can fish it back aboard."

Neale signaled to Hank by means of a bell running from the upper deck near the steering wheel to the motor room below, where the former mule driver looked after the gasolene engine. It was arranged with a clutch, so it could be thrown out

of gear, thus stopping or reversing the power, if need be.

"What's the matter?" called Hank, coming out on the lower deck and looking up at Neale. "Going to make a landing?"

"No. But Dot lost her Alice-doll overboard," Neale explained. "Tess had a string to it and—"

"Oh, is that what the string was?" exclaimed Hank. "I saw a cord drop down at the stern past the motor-room window and I made a grab for it. I thought it was somebody's fish line. Wait, I'll give it a haul and see what I can get on deck."

Leaving the wheel, which needed no attention since power was not now propelling the craft, Neale hastened to the lower deck, followed by Ruth, Tess and Agnes. They saw Hank pulling in, hand over hand, the long, white cord. Presently there came something slapping its way up the side of the *Bluebird,* and a moment later there slumped down on the deck a very wet, and much bedraggled doll.

"Oh, it's my Alice! It's Alice!" cried Dot. "I've got her back once more."

"There won't be much left of her if she gets in the water again," prophesied Neale. "This is the second time this trip."

"She *is* rather forlorn looking," agreed Ruth, trying not to smile and hurt her little sister's feelings, for Dot was very sensitive about her dolls,

especially her "Alice" one. "I shall have to get you a new one, Dot."

"I don't want anybody but my Alice-doll! Will you hang her up in the sun for me so she'll dry?" begged Dot of Neale, holding out to him the really wretched doll.

"Of course, Dottie. And when we get back to Milton we can take her to the hospital again and have her done over as we did after she was buried with the dried apples. Poor Alice-doll! She has had a hard life."

Tess had gone off by herself, thoroughly ashamed of her behavior. Dot now went to her own little room, to grieve over the fate of the Alice-doll.

"Aggie," said Neale, "I think our Tess must have surely gone insane. I never knew her to do a deliberately unkind thing before."

"It certainly is curious. There, Neale, Mr. Howbridge is beckoning to you."

"Yes," Neale replied. "He wants us to start, and he's right. Start her up again, Hank," he added. "We're on Lake Macopic now, and we'll have to watch our step. There's more navigation here than there was on the river."

"Is this really the lake?" asked Ruth. "Are we really on Macopic at last?"

"This is where the river broadens out into the lake," said Neale, indicating the sweep of waters about them. "It is really a part of the lake,

though the larger and main part lies around that point,'' and he indicated the point of land he meant.

Lake Macopic was a large body of water, and on its shores were many towns, villages and one or two places large enough to be dignified by the appellation ''cities.'' Quite a trade was done between some of the places, for the presence of so much water gave opportunity for power to be obtained from it, and around the lake were many mills and factories. There were a number of islands in the lake, some of them large enough for summer hotels, while others were merely clumps of trees. On some, campers spent their vacations, and on one or two, owned by fishermen, cabins were built.

''Yes, we are really here at last,'' said Neale. ''I must find out where we are to head for. Where do you have to deliver this boat, Mr. Howbridge?'' he asked the lawyer.

''At the upper end of the lake,'' was the answer. ''But there is no hurry about it. I intend that we shall all have a nice cruise on Lake Macopic before I let my client have possession of this boat. He is in no special need, and the summer is not nearly enough over to make me want to end our vacation yet. That is, unless you feel you must get back to the Corner House, Martha?'' and he smiled at his oldest ward.

''Oh, no,'' Ruth made haste to reply. ''It is

too lovely here to wish to leave. I'm sure we shall find it most delightful."

"Can we go in swimming?" asked Tess, who liked the water.

"Yes, there are bathing beaches—several of them in fact," answered the lawyer. "We will stop at one and let you children paddle around."

"I can swim!" boasted Tess.

"I can too," added Dot, not to be outdone by her sister.

Lake Macopic was beautiful, reflecting the sunlight, the blue sky, and the white, fleecy clouds. The houseboat once more began slowly navigating it as Hank threw the clutch in and Neale kept the wheel steady. They passed several other boats, and then, as their supplies were running low, it was decided to put in at the nearest town.

"We'll get some cake and maybe a pie or two," said Ruth, after consulting Mrs. MacCall. "And of course, some fresh vegetables."

"Can't we get some strawberries?" questioned Dot.

"Too late I'm afraid, Dot. But maybe we can get huckleberries."

"Oh, I know what I would like," cried Tess.

"I know too," declared Agnes. "An ice-cream cone."

" Yep. Strawberry."

"I want chocolate," came promptly from Dot.

"And oh, can't we have some lollypops too?" went on Tess.

"Sure—if the stores keep them," answered Mr. Howbridge promptly. "Yes, I see a sign, 'Ice Cream and Confectionery.' I guess we can get what we want over there—when we reach the place."

"Oh, goody," cried Dot; and Tess patted her stomach in satisfaction.

It was early evening when they tied up at a wharf, which was operated in conjunction with a store, and while Mrs. MacCall and the girls were buying such things as were needed, Neale and Mr. Howbridge made some inquiries regarding the rules for navigating the lake. They found there would be no trouble in getting the *Bluebird* from place to place.

"Have you seen a small motor boat run by two men around here lately?" asked the lawyer of the dock keeper, after some unimportant talk.

"What sort of men?"

"Roughly dressed."

"That isn't much of a description," was the retort. "A lot of the fishermen dress roughly, but they're all right. But we do have some fellows up here who aren't what I'd call first-class."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Howbridge.

"Well, I mean there's a bunch camping on one of the islands here. Somebody said they were

returned miners from the Klondike, but I don't know that I believe that."

"Why, those may be the very men we mean!" cried the lawyer. "One of them claims, or is said to have been, in the Alaskan gold regions. In fact this young man's father is, or was, a Klondike miner," went on Mr. Howbridge, indicating Neale. "Maybe these men could tell us something about him. Did you ever hear any of them mention a Mr. O'Neil?" he asked.

The dock tender shook his head.

"Can't say I did," he answered. "I don't have much to do with those men. They're too rough for me. They may be the ones you mean, and they may not."

Further questioning elicited no more information, and Neale and Mr. Howbridge had to be content with this.

"But we'll pay a visit to that island," decided the lawyer, when its location had been established. "We may get some news of your father in that way."

"I hope so," sighed Neale.

Rather than tie up at the dock that night, which would bring them too near the not very pleasant sights and sounds of a waterfront neighborhood, it was decided to anchor the *Bluebird* out some distance in the lake.

Accordingly, at dusk, when supper was over and a little stroll on shore had gotten the "kinks"

out of their "sea legs," the *Bluebird* was headed into the lake again and moored, with riding lights to warn other craft away.

In the middle of the night Neale felt the need of a drink, as he had eaten some buttered popcorn the evening before and he was now thirsty. As he arose to get a glass of water from a shelf in his apartment he became aware of a strange movement. At the same time he could hear the sighing of the wind.

"Sounds as if a storm were coming up," mused the boy. And then, as he reached out his hand for the glass, he felt the *Bluebird* rise, fall and sway beneath him.

"Why, we're moving! We're drifting!" exclaimed Neale. "The anchor must be dragging or the cables have been cut. We're drifting fast, and may be in danger!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE STORM

NEALE O'NEIL was a lad to whom, young as he was, emergencies came as a sort of second nature. His life in the circus had prepared him for quick and unusual action. Many times, while traveling with the tented shows, accidents had happened. Sometimes one of the animals would get loose, perhaps one of the "hay feeders," by which is meant the elephants, horses or camels. Or, worse than this, one of the big "cats," or the meat eaters—including lions, tigers and leopards —would break from a cage. Then consternation would reign.

But Neale had seen how the circus men had met these emergencies, always working for the safety of others.

And now, as he seemed to be alone in the semi-darkness and silence of the houseboat at midnight, Neale felt that the time had come for him to act.

"We must have pulled our anchor, or else some one has cut us adrift," decided the lad. "And if any one has cut us loose it must be those men from the motor boat—the tramps—the thieves!"

He visualized their evil countenances and thought of how they had behaved toward Ruth and Agnes—that is, if these were the two men in question.

"And I wonder if Hank stands in with them," mused Neale. "I must find out. But first I've got to do something about the boat. If we're adrift, as we surely are, we may run into some other craft, or one may run into us, or—"

Neale paused as he felt a grating beneath the broad, flat bottom of the boat and the craft careened slightly.

"We may go aground or be blown on an island," was his completed thought. "But we're safe so far," he mentally added, as he felt the *Bluebird* slip off some under-water rock or reef of mud over which she progressed.

Then Neale galvanized himself into action. He forgot all about the drink he had been going to get, and, slipping on shoes and a rubber coat that hung in his room, he stepped out into the corridor which ran the length of the boat between the two rows of sleeping rooms.

Neale was going up on deck to look around and, if possible, find out what had caused the boat to break away from her moorings.

As Neale passed Ruth's door it opened and she came out, wrapped in a heavy robe.

"What is it, Neale?" asked the oldest Corner House girl. "Has anything happened?"

"Nothing much yet. But it may," was the answer. "We're adrift, and it's coming on to blow. I'm going to see what the matter is."

"I'll come with you," Ruth offered. Neale was like a brother to the Kenway girls. "Shall I call Mr. Howbridge and Mrs. Mac?" she asked.

"Not yet," he answered in a low voice. "It may be that the cable has only slipped, but I don't see how it could. In that case I'll only have to take a few turns around a cleat and we'll be all right. No use calling any one unless we have to."

"I'll come and help," Ruth offered, and Neale knew she could be of excellent service.

Together they ascended the stairs in the half darkness, illuminated by the glow from a night oil lamp in the hall. But no sooner had they emerged on the open deck than they became aware of the gravity of the situation. They were almost blinded by an intense glare of lightning. This was followed by a menacing rumble of thunder, and then Ruth gasped for breath as a strong wind smote her in the face, and Neale, just ahead of her, turned to grasp her lest she be blown against a railing and hurt.

"Great guns!" exclaimed Neale, "it's going to be a fierce storm."

"Are we really adrift?" exclaimed Ruth, raising her voice to be heard above the howl of the wind.

"I should say we are!" cried Neale in answer. "But the boat is so big and solid she isn't going as fast as an ordinary craft would. But we're drifting all right, and it's going to be a whole lot worse before it's better. Do you want to stay here?" he asked.

"Of course I do! I'm going to help!" declared Ruth. But at that moment came another bright flash of lightning and a terrific peal of thunder. And then, as if this had split open the clouds, down came a deluge of rain.

"Go below and get on your waterproof and then tell the others to get up and dress," advised Neale. "We may come out of it all right, and again we may not. It's best to be prepared."

"Are we—are we far from shore?" panted Ruth, the wind almost taking the words from her mouth. "Are we apt to be dashed against it, do you think?"

"We can't be wrecked," Neale answered her. "This is a well built boat. But we may have to go ashore in the rain, and it's best for the children to be dressed."

"I'll tell them!" cried Ruth, and she descended, glad to be in out of the storm that was increasing in violence every moment. That little time she was exposed to it almost drenched her. Neale's rubber coat was a great protection to him.

The boy gave one quick look around. The wind was blowing about over the deck a number of

camp stools that had been left out, but he reasoned that they would be caught and held by the rope network about the deck. Neale's chief anxiety was about the anchor.

The cable to which this was bent was made fast to a cleat on the lower deck, and as the lad made his way there by an outside stairway he heard some one walking on the deck he had just quitted.

"I guess that's Hank," Neale reasoned.

The boy was pulling at the anchor rope when he heard Hank's voice near him asking:

"What's the matter, Neale?"

"We're either dragging our anchor or the cable's cut," answered the lad. And then, as the rope came dripping through his hands, offering no resistance to the pull, he realized what had happened. The anchor was gone! It had slipped the cable or been cut loose. Just which did not so much matter now, as did the fact that there was nothing to hold the *Bluebird* against the fury of the gale.

Realizing this, Neale did not pull the cable up to the end. He had found out what he wanted to know—that the anchor was off it and somewhere on the bottom of the lake. He next turned his attention to the boat.

"We're drifting!" he cried to Hank. "We've got to start the motor, and see if we can head up

into the wind. You go to that and I'll take the wheel!"

"All right," agreed the mule driver. "This is some storm!" he added, bending his head to the blast of the wind and the drive of the rain.

It was growing worse every moment, Neale realized. Buttoned as his rubber coat was, the lower part blew open every now and then, drenching his bare legs.

As the boy hurried to the upper deck again to take command of the steering wheel, he heard from within the *Bluebird* sounds which told him the Corner House girls, their guardian, and Mrs. MacCall were getting up. The voices of Tess and Dot could be heard, excited and somewhat frightened.

"The only real danger," thought Neale to himself, "is that we may hit a rock or something, and stave a hole in us. In that case we'd sink, I guess, and this lake is deep."

But he had not told Ruth that danger. He grasped the spokes of the wheel firmly, and waited for the vibration that would tell him Hank had started the motor. And as he waited he had to face the wind and rain, and listen to the vibrating thunder, the while he was almost blinded by the vivid lightning. It was one of those fierce summer storms, and the temperature took a sudden drop so that Neale was chilled through.

"Why doesn't Hank start that motor?" impatiently thought the lad. "We're drifting fast and that big island must be somewhere in this neighborhood. I wonder how close it is? If we hit that going like this—good-night?"

A vivid flash of light split the darkness like a dagger of flame and revealed the heaving tumultuous lake all about, the waters whipped and lashed into foam by the sudden wind. Storms came up quickly on Lake Macopic, due to the exposed situation of the body of water, and there were often fatalities caused by boats being caught unprepared.

Just as Neale was going to take a chance and hurry below to see what was delaying Hank, there came the vibration of the craft which told that the motor had been started.

"Now we'll get somewhere," cried Neale aloud. "I think I'd better head into the wind and try to make shore. If I can get her under the shelter of that bluff we passed this afternoon, it will be the best for all of us."

He swung the wheel around, noting that the *Bluebird* answered to the helm, and then he dashed the water from his face with a motion of his head, shaking back his hair. As the craft gathered speed a figure came up the stairs and emerged on deck. It fought its way across the deck to the wheel and a voice asked:

"Are we making progress, Neale?' '

"You shouldn't have come here, Aggie!" he cried, above the noise of the storm. Page 203

"Oh, yes! But you shouldn't have come up here, Aggie!" he cried, above the noise of the storm. "You'll be drenched!"

"No, I have on Mr. Howbridge's raincoat. I made him and Ruthie let me come up here to help you. You certainly need help in this emergency."

"It's an emergency all right!" declared Neale. "But we may come out of it safely."

"Can't I help you steer?" asked Agnes. "I know how."

"Yes, you may help. I'm trying to make—"

Neale never finished that sentence. A moment later there was a jar that made him and Agnes stagger, and then the *Bluebird* ceased to progress under the power of her motor and was again being blown before the fury of the storm.

CHAPTER XXII

ON THE ISLAND

"WHAT'S the matter? What has happened?" cried Agnes, clinging partly to Neale and partly to the wheel to preserve her balance. "Are we sinking?"

"Oh, no," he answered. "We either struck something, or the motor has gone bad and stopped. I think it's the last. I'd better go and see."

"I'll take the wheel," Agnes offered.

"You don't need to," said her companion. "She had no steerageway on her; and you might as well keep out of the storm. The rain is fierce!"

Agnes decided to take this advice, since staying on deck now would do no good and Neale was going below.

Neale raced to the motor room, where he found Hank ruefully contemplating the silent engine.

"What's the matter?" asked Neale. "Is she broken?"

"Busted, or something," was the answer. "If this was a mule, now, I could argue with it. But I don't know enough about motors to take any chances. All I know is she was going all right, and then she suddenly laid down on me—stopped dead."

"Yes, I felt it," returned Neale. "Well, we'll have to see what the trouble is."

Agnes had gone into the main cabin where she found her sisters and Mr. Howbridge. Mrs. MacCall, in a nightcap she had forgotten to remove, was sitting in one corner.

"Oh, the perils o' the deep! The perils o' the deep!" she murmured. "The salty seas will snatch us fra the land o' the livin'!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mr. Howbridge, for he saw that Dot and Tess were getting frightened by the fear of the Scotch housekeeper's words. "Lake Macopic isn't salty, and it isn't deep. We'll be all right in a little while. Here's Agnes back to tell us so," he added with a smile at his ward. "What of the night, Watchman?" he asked in a bantering tone.

"Well, it isn't a very pleasant night," Agnes was forced to admit.

"Why aren't we moving?" asked Tess. "We were moving and now we have stopped."

"Neale has gone to see, Tess. He will have things in shape before long," was Agnes' not very confident reply.

"Well, we're nice and snug here," said Ruth, guessing that something was wrong, and joining forces with Agnes is keeping it from Mrs. MacCall and the younger children. "We are snug and dry here."

"I think I'll go and give the sailors a hand,"

Mr. Howbridge said. "Ruth, you tell these little teases a story," he said as he shifted Dot out of his lap and to a couch where he covered her with a blanket.

"I'll get this wet coat off," remarked Agnes. "My, but it does rain!" She passed Mr. Howbridge his coat.

Ruth took her place as mistress of the little household of Corner House girls—mother to the three parentless sisters who depended so much on her.

"And now, children, for the story!" she said. "What shall it be about?"

This took the attention of Tess and Dot off their worries, and though the wind still howled and the rain dashed against the windows of the *Bluebird,* they heeded it not.

Meanwhile Mr. Howbridge had made his way to the motor room where a sound of hammering on iron told him that efforts to make repairs were under way.

"What is it, boys?" he asked as he saw Neale and Hank busy over the motor.

"A wrench was jarred loose and fell into the flywheel pit," explained Neale. "It stopped the motor suddenly, and until we get it loose we can't move the machinery. We're trying to knock it out."

"Need any help?" asked the lawyer, who had donned an old suit of clothing.

"I think we can manage," said Neale. "But you might take a look outside and see what's happening. That is, besides the storm. We can hear that."

"Yes, it seems to insist on being heard," agreed the guardian of the girls. "You say the anchor is dragging, Neale?"

"No, it's gone completely. At the bottom of the lake somewhere. I didn't have a chance to examine the end of the cable to see if it was cut or not."

"Cut!" exclaimed the lawyer in surprise.

"Well, it may have been cut by—accident," went on Neale, with a meaning look which Mr. Howbridge understood.

"I'll find out," was the comment, and then the lawyer went out into the rain while Neale and the mule driver resumed their labors to loosen the monkey wrench which was jammed under the flywheel, thus effectually preventing the motor from operating.

Mr. Howbridge made his way along the lower deck until he came to where the anchor cable was made fast to the holding cleat. He pulled up the dripping rope, hand over hand, until he had the end on deck.

A lightning flash served to show him that the end was partly cut and partly frayed through.

"It may have chafed on a sunken rock or been partly cut on the edge of something under water,"

thought the lawyer. "At any rate the anchor is gone, and unless I can bend on a spare one we've got to drift until they can get the motor going. I wonder if I can find a spare anchor. Captain Leed said nothing about one when he turned the boat over to me."

Stumbling about the deck in the rain, storm and darkness, the lawyer sought for a possible spare anchor. Meanwhile Ruth kept up the spirits of her two smallest sisters and Mrs. MacCall by gayly telling stories. She was a true "little mother," and in this instance she well deserved the appellations of both "Martha" and "Minerva."

Fortunate it was for the Corner House girls that the *Bluebird* was a staunch craft, broad of beam and stout in her bottom planks. Otherwise she never would have weathered the storm that had her in its grip.

Lake Macopic was subject to these sudden outbursts of the furious elements. It was surrounded by hills, and through the intervening valleys currents of air swept down, lashing the waters into big waves. Sailing craft are more at the mercy of the wind and water than are power boats, but when these last have lost their ability to progress they are in worse plight than the other craft, being less substantial in build.

But the *Bluebird* was not exactly of either of these types. In fact the craft on which the

Corner House girls were voyaging was merely a big scow with a broad, flat bottom and a superstructure made into the semblance of a house on shore—with limitations, of course. It would be practically impossible to tip over the craft. The worst that could happen, and it would be a sufficient disaster, would be that a hole might be stove in the barge-like hull which would fill, and thus sink the boat. And the lake was deep enough in many places to engulf the *Bluebird.*

Mr. Howbridge realized this as he stumbled about the lower deck, looking for something that would serve as an anchor. He soon came to the conclusion that there was not a spare one on board, for had there been it naturally would have been in plain view to be ready for use in emergencies.

Having made a circuit of the deck, not finding anything that could be used, Mr. Howbridge debated with himself what he had better do next. He stepped into a small storeroom in the stern of the craft above the motor compartment where Neale and Hank were working, and there the lawyer flashed the pocket electric torch he carried. It gave him a view of a heterogeneous collection of articles, and when he saw a heavy piece of iron his eyes lightened.

"This may do for an anchor," he said. "I'll fasten it on the rope and heave it overboard."

But when he tried to move it alone he found

it was beyond his strength. He could almost manage it, but a little more strength was needed.

"I'll have to get Neale or Hank," mused Mr. Howbridge. "But I hate to ask them to stop. The safety of the *Bluebird* may depend on how quickly they get the motor started. And yet—"

He heard some one approaching along the lower deck and a moment later a flash of lightning revealed to him Ruth.

"I heard some one in here," said the Corner House girl, "and I came to see who it was. I thought maybe the door had blown open and was banging."

"I was looking for an anchor, and I have found one, though I can't move it alone," the lawyer said. "But why have you left your sisters?"

"Because Mrs. Mac is telling them a Scotch story. She has managed to interest them, and, at the same time, she is forgetting her own troubles. So I came out. Let me help move the anchor, or whatever it is."

"Spoken like Martha!" said Mr. Howbridge. "Well, perhaps your added strength will be just what is needed. But you must be careful not to strain yourself," he added, anxiously.

"I am no baby!" exclaimed Ruth. "I want to help! Where is it?"

Flashing his light again, her guardian showed her, and then, while the wind seemed to howl in fiercer fury, if that were possible, and while the

rain beat down like hail-pellets, they managed to drag out on deck the heavy piece of iron, which seemed to be some part of a machine.

The storeroom opened on that side of the deck where the superstructure of the houseboat gave some shelter, and, working in this, Ruth and Mr. Howbridge managed to get the frayed end of the anchor rope attached to the heavy iron.

"Now if we can heave this overboard it may save us from drifting on the rocks until Neale and Hank can get the engine to working again," said the lawyer.

"We'll try!" exclaimed Ruth. Her guardian caught a glimpse of her face as the skies flashed forth into flame again. Her lips were parted from her rapid breathing, revealing her white teeth, and even in the stress and fury of the storm Mr. Howbridge could not but admire her. Though no one ever called Ruth Kenway pretty, there was an undeniable charm about her, and that had been greater, her guardian thought, ever since the day of Luke Shepard's entrance into her life.

"It's our last hope, and a forlorn one," Mr. Howbridge said dubiously, looking at their anchor.

Together they managed to drag the heavy piece of iron to the edge of the deck. Then, making sure the rope was fast about the cleat, they heaved the improvised anchor over the side. It fell into Lake Macopic with a great splash.

"What was that?" cried Neale, coming out on deck, followed by Agnes, who had been down watching him work at the engine.

"Our new anchor," replied the lawyer. "It may serve to hold us if you can't get the engine to working," and he explained what he and Ruth had done.

"Good!" exclaimed Neale. "I hope it does hold, for it doesn't seem as if we were going to get that monkey wrench out in a hurry. I'm looking for a long bar of iron to see if we can use it as a lever."

"There may be one in the storeroom where we found the anchor," remarked Ruth.

"I'll have a look."

The *Bluebird* was not living up to her name. Instead of skimming more or less lightly over the surface of the lake she was rolling to and fro in the trough of the waves, which were really high. Now and then the crest of some comber broke over the snub bow of the craft, sending back the spray in a shower that rattled on the front windows of the cabin.

Anxiously the four on deck waited to see the effect of the anchor. If it held, catching on the bottom of the lake, it would mean a partial solution of their troubles. If it dragged—

Neale hastened to the side and looked down at the anchor cable. It was taut, showing that the

weight had not slipped off. But the drift of the boat was not checked.

"Why doesn't it hold?" asked Ruth.

"Is it dragging?" came from the lawyer.

"I don't believe it is touching bottom," replied Neale. "I'm afraid the rope is too short. We are moving faster than before."

Just as he spoke there came a vivid flash of lightning. Involuntarily they all shrank. It seemed as though they were about to be blasted where they stood. And then, as a great crash followed, they trembled with the vibration of its rumble.

The next instant Ruth and Agnes cried simultaneously:

"Look! We're being blown ashore!"

Neale and Mr. Howbridge peered through the darkness. Another lightning flash showed their peril.

"We're going to hit the island!" shouted Neale.

A few second later the wind blew the *Bluebird,* beams-on, upon a rocky shore.

CHAPTER XXIII

SUSPICIONS

THE shock of the sudden stop, the tilting of the craft, which was sharply careened to one side, the howl of the wind, the rumble of the thunder, the flash of the lightning, and the dash of the rain—all these combined to make the position of those aboard the *Bluebird* anything but enviable.

"Are we lost! Oh, are we lost?" cried Mrs. MacCall, rushing out of the cabin. "Ha the seas engulfed us?"

"No, nothing of the sort!" answered Mr. Howbridge. "Please don't get excited, and go back to the children. We are all right!"

"Yes, I believe we are," added Neale, as another flash showed what had happened. "At least we are in no danger of sinking now."

For they had been sent before the fury of the storm straight upon the rocky shore of one of the large islands of Lake Macopic. And there the houseboat came to rest.

As Neale had said, all danger of foundering was passed, and in case of need they could easily escape to substantial land, though it was but an island. But tilted as the *Bluebird* was, forming

a less comfortable abode than formerly, she offered a better place to stay than did the woods of the island, bending as they were now to the fierce wind, and drenched as they were in the pelting rain.

"We're here for the night, at least," said Neale, as the continued lightning revealed more fully what had happened. "We shall not drift any more, and though there's a lot of excitement going on, I guess we can keep dry."

He and Mr. Howbridge, with Ruth and Agnes, stood out on the open, lower deck, but there was a shelter over their heads and the sides of the house part of the boat kept the rain from them. The storm was coming from the west, and they had been blown on the weather side of the island. The lee shore was on the other side. There they would have been sheltered, but they could not choose their situation.

"We'd better take a turn with a rope around a tree or two," suggested Hank, as he came up to join the little party. "No use drifting off again."

"You're right," agreed Neale. "And then we can turn in and wait for morning. I only hope—"

"What?" asked Agnes, as he hesitated.

"I hope it clears," Neale finished. But what he had been going to say was that he hoped no holes would be stove in the hull of the boat.

It was no easy task for him and Hank to get two lines ashore—from bow and stern—and fasten

them to trees. But eventually it was accomplished. Then, as if it had worked its worst, the storm appeared to decrease in violence and it was possible to get a little rest.

However, before turning in again, Mrs. MacCall insisted on making a pot of tea for the older folk, while the small children were given some bread and milk. As the berths where Dot and Tess had been sleeping were uncomfortably tilted by the listing of the boat, the little girls were given the places occupied by Ruth and Agnes, who managed to make shift to get some rest in the slanting beds.

"Whew!" exclaimed Neale as he went to his room when all that was possible had been done, "this has been some night!"

As might have been expected, the morning broke clear, warm and sunny, and the only trace of the storm was in the rather high waves of the lake. Before Mrs. MacCall served breakfast Neale, Mr. Howbridge, Agnes and Ruth went ashore, an easy matter, since the *Bluebird* was stranded, and made an examination. They found their craft so firmly fixed on the rocky shore that help would be needed before she could be floated.

"But how are we going to get help?" asked Ruth.

"Oh, there may be fishermen living on this island," said Mr. Howbridge. "We'll make a tour and see."

"And if there is none," added Neale, "Hank or I can row over to the next nearest island or to the mainland and bring back some men."

The *Bluebird* carried on her afterdeck a small skiff to be used in making trips to and from the craft when she was at anchor out in some stream or lake. This boat would be available for the journey to the mainland or to another island.

An examination showed that the houseboat was not damaged more than superficially, and after a hearty breakfast, Neale and Mr. Howbridge held a consultation with Ruth and Agnes.

"What we had better do is this," said the lawyer. "We had better turn our energies in two ways. One toward getting the disabled motor in shape, and the other toward seeking help to put us afloat once more."

"Hank can work on the motor," decided Neale. "All it needs is to have the monkey wrench taken out of the pit. In fact the space is so cramped that only one can work to advantage at a time. That will leave me free to go ashore in the boat."

"Why not try this island first?" asked Ruth. "If there are any fishermen here they could help us get afloat, and it would save time. It is quite a distance to the main shore or even to the next island."

"Yes, it is," agreed Neale. "But I don't mind the row."

"It is still rough," put in Agnes, looking over the heaving lake.

"Then I think the best thing to do," said Mr. Howbridge, "is for some of us to go ashore and see if we can find any men to help us. Three or four of them, with long poles, could pry the *Bluebird* off the rocks and into the water again."

"Oh, do let's go ashore!" cried Agnes, and Tess and Dot, coming up just then, echoed this.

Mrs. MacCall did not care to go, saying she would prepare dinner for them. Hank took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and started to work on the motor, while the others began their island explorations.

The houseboat had been blown on one of the largest bits of wooded land that studded Lake Macopic. In fact it was so large and wild that after half an hour's walk no sign of habitation or inhabitants had been seen.

"Looks to be deserted," said Neale. "I guess I'll have to make the trip to the mainland after all."

"Perhaps," agreed the lawyer, while Ruth called to Tess and Dot not to stray too far off in their eagerness to see all there was to be seen in the strange woods. "Well, we are in no special rush, and while our position is not altogether comfortable on board the *Bluebird,* the relief from the storm is grateful. I wonder—"

"Hark!" suddenly whispered Ruth, holding up a hand to enjoin silence. "I hear voices!"

They all heard them a moment later.

"I guess some one lives here after all," remarked Mr. Howbridge. "The talk seems to come from just beyond us."

"Let's follow this path," suggested Neale, pointing to a fairly well defined one amid the trees. It skirted the shore, swung down into a little hollow, and then emerged on the bank of a small cove which formed a natural harbor for a small motor boat.

And a motor boat was at that moment in the sheltered cove. All in the party saw it, and they also saw something else. This was a view of two roughly dressed men, who, at the sound of crackling branches and rustling leaves beneath the feet of the explorers, looked up quickly.

"It's them again! Come on!" quickly cried one of the men, and in an instant they had jumped into the motor boat which was tied to a tree near shore.

It was the work of but a moment for one of them to turn over the flywheel and start the motor. The other cast off, and in less than a minute from the time the Corner House girls and their friends had glimpsed them the two ragged men were on their way in their boat out of the cove.

"Look! Look!" cried Ruth, pointing at them. "They're the same ones!"

"The men we saw at the lock?" asked Neale.

"Yes, and the men who robbed us— I am almost positive of that!" cried the oldest Corner House girl.

"The rascals!" exclaimed the lawyer. "They're going to escape us again! Fate seems to be with them! Every time we come upon them they manage to distance us!"

This was what was happening now. The tramps—such they seemed to be, though the possession of a motor boat took them out of the ordinary class—with never a look behind, speeded away.

"How provoking!" cried Agnes. "To think they have our jewelry and we can't make them give it up."

"You are not sure they have it," said Mr. Howbridge, as the motor craft passed out of sight beyond a tree-fringed point.

"I think I am," said Ruth. "If they are not guilty why do they always hurry away when they see us?"

"Well, Minerva, that is a question I can not answer," said her guardian, with a smile. "You are a better lawyer than I when it comes to that. Certainly it does look suspicious."

"Oh, for a motor boat!" sighed Neale. "I'd like to chase those rascals!"

"Yes, it would be interesting to find out why

they seem to fear us," agreed Mr. Howbridge. "But it's too late, now."

"I wonder why they came to this island," mused Ruth. "Do you think they were fishermen?"

"They didn't have any implements of the trade," said Mr. Howbridge. "But their presence proves that the island is not altogether uninhabited. Let's go along, and we may find some one to help get the boat back into the water."

They resumed their journey, new beauties of nature being revealed at very step. The trees and grass were particularly green after the effective washing of the night before, and there were many wild flowers which the two little girls gathered, with many exclamations of delight.

Turning with the path, the trampers suddenly came to a small clearing amid the trees. It was a little grassy glade, through which flowed a stream of water, doubtless from some hidden spring higher up among the rocks. But what most interested Neale, Agnes, Ruth and the lawyer was a small cabin that stood in the middle of the beautiful green grass.

"There's a house!" cried Dot. "Look!"

"It's the start of one, anyhow," agreed Mr. Howbridge.

"And somebody lives in it," went on Ruth, as the door of the cabin opened and a heavily bearded man came out, followed by a dog. The dog ran,

barking, toward the explorers, but a command from the man brought him back.

"I hope we aren't trespassing," said Mr. Howbridge. "We were blown on the island last night, and we're looking for help to get our houseboat back into the lake."

"Oh, no, you aren't trespassing," the man replied with a smile, showing two rows of white teeth that contrasted strangely with his black beard. "I own part of the island, but not all of it. What sort of boat did you say?"

"Houseboat," and the lawyer explained the trouble. "Are there men here we can get to help us pole her off the shore?" he asked.

"Well, I guess I and my two boys could give you a hand," was the slow answer. "They've gone over to the mainland with some fish to sell, but they'll be back around noon."

"We'll be glad of their help," went on the lawyer. "Do you live here all the while?"

"Mostly. I and my boys fish and guide. Lots of men come here in the summer that don't know where to fish, and we take 'em out."

"Were those your two sons we saw in a motor boat back there in the cove?" asked Neale, indicating the place where the tramps had been observed. Rather anxiously the bearded man's answer was awaited.

"What sort of boat was it?" he countered.

Neale described it sufficiently well.

"No, those weren't my boys," returned the man, while the dog made friends with the visitors, much to the delight of Dot and Tess. "We haven't any such boat as that. I don't know who those fellows could be, though of course many people come to this island."

"I wish we could find out who those men are," said Mr. Howbridge. "I have peculiar reasons for wanting to know," he went on.

"I think they call themselves Klondikers, because they have been, or claim to have been, to the Alaskan Klondike," said Neale. "Do you happen to know any Klondikers around here?"

Somewhat to the surprise of the boy the answer came promptly:

"Yes, I do. A man named O'Neil."

"What!" exclaimed Neale, starting forward. "Do you know my father? Where is he? Tell me about him!"

"Well, I don't know that he's your father," went on the black-bearded man. "Though, now I recollect, he did say he had a son and he hoped to see him soon. But this O'Neil lives on one of the islands here in the lake. Or at least he's been staying there the last week. He bought some fish of me, and he said then he'd been to the Klondike after gold."

"Did he say he got any?" asked Neale.

The man of the cabin shook his head.

"I wouldn't say so," he remarked. "Mr.

O'Neil had to borrow money of one of my boys to hire a boat. I guess he's poorer than the general run. He couldn't have got any gold in the Klondike."

At this answer Neale's heart sank, and a worried suspicion crept into his mind. If his father were poor it might explain something that had been troubling the boy of late. Somehow, all the brightness seemed to go out of the day. Neale's happy prospects appeared very dim now.

"Poor father!" he murmured to himself.

Suddenly, from the lake behind them came some loud shouts, at which the dog began to bark. Then followed a shot, and the animal raced down the slope toward the water.

CHAPTER XXIV

CLOSING IN

"PERHAPS these are the men!" exclaimed Ruth to the lawyer.

"What men?" he asked.

"Those tramps—the ones who robbed us in the rain storm that day. If they come here—"

"What's the matter?" asked the man of the cabin—Aleck Martin he had said his name was. "What seems to be the trouble with the young lady?" And, as he spoke, gazing at Ruth, the barking of the dog and the shouting grew apace.

"She is excited, thinking the rascals about whom we have been inquiring might now make their appearance," Mr. Howbridge answered.

Mr. Martin laughed so heartily that his black beard waved up and down like a bush in the wind, and Dot and Tess watched it in fascination.

"Excuse me, friend," the dweller in the cabin went on, "but I couldn't help it. Those are my two boys coming back. They always cut up like that. Seems like the quietness of the lake and this island gets on their nerves sometimes, and they have to raise a ruction. No harm in it, not

a bit. Jack, the dog, enjoys it as much as they do."

This was evident a few moments later, for up the slope came two sturdy young men, one carrying a gun, and the dog was frisking about between the two, having the jolliest time imaginable.

"There are my boys!" said Mr. Martin, and he spoke with pride.

"Oh, will you excuse me?" asked Ruth, in some confusion.

"That's all right—they do look like tramps," said their father. "But you can't wear your best clothes fussing around boats and fish and taking parties out. Well, Tom and Henry, any luck?" he asked the newcomers.

"Extra fine, Dad," answered one, while both of them stared curiously at the visitors.

"That's good," went on Mr. Martin. "These folks," he added, "were blown ashore last night in their houseboat. They want help to get it off."

"Will you go and look at her, and then we can make a bargain?" interposed Mr. Howbridge.

"Oh, shucks now, friend, we aren't always out for money, though we make a living by working for summer folks like you," said Mr Martin, smiling.

"Is that your boat over there?" asked one of the young men whose name, they learned later, was Tom.

"Yes," assented Neale, for the fisherman pointed in the direction of the stranded *Bluebird,* which, however, could not be seen from the cabin.

"We saw her as we came around," went on Henry. "I wondered what she was doing up on shore, and we intended to have a look after we tied up our craft."

"Will you be able to help us get her afloat?" asked Ruth, for she rather liked the healthful, manly appearance of the two young men.

"Sure!" assented their father. "This is that O'Neil man's son," he went on, speaking to his boys.

"What, O'Neil; the Klondiker?" asked Tom quickly.

"Yes," assented Neale. "Can you tell me about him? Where is he? How did he make out in Alaska?"

"Well, he's on an island about ten miles from here," was the answer of Henry. "As for making out, I don't believe he did very well in the gold business, to tell you the truth. He doesn't say much about it, but I guess the other men got most of it."

"What other men?" asked Neale, and again his heart sank and that terrible suspicion came back to him.

"Oh, a bunch he is in with," answered Henry Martin. "They all live together in a shack on Cedar Island. Your father hired a boat of us. I

trusted him for it, as he said he had no ready cash. But I reckon it's all right."

This only served to make Neale more uneasy. He had been hoping against hope that his father would have found at least a competence in the Klondike.

Now it seemed he had not, and, driven by poverty, he might have adopted desperate measures. Nor did Neale like the remarks about his father being in with a "bunch" of men. True, Mr. O'Neil had been in the circus at one time, and they, of necessity, are a class of rough and ready men. But they are honest, Neale reflected. These other men—if the two who had escaped in the motor boat were any samples—were not to be trusted.

So it was with falling spirits that the boy waited for what was to happen next.

Agnes' quick mind and ready sympathy guessed Neale's thoughts.

"It will be all right, Neale O'Neil. You know it will. Your father couldn't go wrong."

"You're a pal worth having, Aggie," he whispered to the girl.

"I would like to see my father," he said to the lawyer. "Do you think we could go to Cedar Island in the houseboat?"

"Of course we can!" exclaimed Mr. Howbridge. "We'll go as soon as we can get her afloat."

"And that won't take long; she didn't seem to be in a bad position," said Tom. "Come on, we'll go over now," he went on, nodding to his father and his brother.

"I have an Alice-doll on the boat," said Dot, taking a sudden liking to Henry.

"You have?" he exclaimed, taking hold of her hand which she thrust confidingly into his. "Well, that's fine! I wish I had a doll!"

"Do you?" asked Dot, all smiles now. "Well, I have a lot of 'em at home. There's Muriel and Bonnie Betty and a sailor boy doll, and Nosmo King Kenway, and then I have twins—Ann Eliza and Eliza Ann, and—"

"Eliza Ann isn't a twin any more—anyway not a good twin," put in Tess. "Both her legs are off!"

"Oh, that's too bad!" exclaimed Henry sympathetically.

"And if you want a doll, I can give you one of mine," proceeded Dot. "Only I don't want to give you Alice-doll 'cause she's all I have with me. But if you want Muriel—"

"Muriel has only one eye," said Tess quickly.

"I think I should love a one-eyed doll!" said the young man, who seemed to know just how to talk to children.

"Then I'll send her to you!" delightedly offered Dot.

"And I'll send you one of Almira's kittens!" said Tess, who did not seem to want her sister to do all the giving.

"Hold on there! Don't I get anything?" asked Tom, in mock distress.

"Almira's got a lot of kittens," said Dot. "Would you like one of them?"

"Well I should say so! If Henry's going to have a kitten and a doll, I think I ought at least to have a kitten," he said.

"Well, I'll send you one," promised Tess.

And then, with the two children, one in charge of Henry and the other holding Tom's hand, the trip was made back to where the *Bluebird* was stranded.

"It won't be much of a job to get her off," declared Mr. Martin, when he and his sons had made an expert examination. "Get some long poles, boys, and some blocks, and I think half an hour's work will do the trick."

"Oh, shall we be able to move soon?" asked Mrs. MacCall, coming out on deck.

"We hope so," answered Ruth, as she went on board and told of the visit to the cabin, while Neale hurried to the engine room to see what success Hank had met with. The mule driver had succeeded in getting the monkey wrench out from under the flywheel, and the craft could move under her own power once she was afloat.

"What's the matter with Neale?" asked Mrs.

MacCall, while the men were in the woods getting the poles. "He looks as if all the joy had departed from life."

"I'm afraid it has, for him," said Ruth soberly. "It seems that his father is located near here—on Cedar Island—and is poor."

"Nothing in that to take the joy out of life!" And Mrs. MacCall strode away.

"Well, being poor isn't anything," declared Agnes. "Lots of people are poor. We were, before Uncle Peter Stower left us the Corner House."

"I think Neale fears his father may have had something to do with— Oh, Agnes, I hate to say it, but I think Neale believes his father either robbed us, or knows something about the men who took the jewelry box!"

"But we know it isn't true!" exclaimed Agnes.

"Anyway, the Klondike trip was a failure."

"Yes, and I'm so sorry!" exclaimed Agnes. "Couldn't we help—"

"I think we shall just have to wait," advised her sister. "We can talk to Mr. Howbridge about it after we find out more. I think they are going to move the boat now."

This task was undertaken, and to such good advantage did Mr. Martin and his sons work, aided, of course, by Neale, Mr. Howbridge and Hank, that the *Bluebird* was soon afloat again.

"Now we can go on, and when I get back home

I'll send you a doll and a pussy cat!" offered Dot to Henry.

"And I'll send you two pussy cats!" Tess said to Tom.

The young men laughed, their father joining in.

"How much do I owe you?" asked the lawyer, when it was certain that the houseboat was afloat, undamaged, and could proceed on her way.

"Not a cent!" was the hearty answer of Mr. Martin. "We always help our neighbors up here, and you were neighbors for a while," he added with a laugh.

"Well, I'm a thousand times obliged to you," said the guardian of the Corner House girls. "Our trip might have been spoiled if we couldn't have gone on, though I must say you have a delightful resting spot in this island."

"We like it here," admitted the fisherman, while his sons were looking over the houseboat, which they pronounced "slick."

Neale seemed to have lost heart and spirit. Dot and Tess, of course, did not notice it so much, as there was plenty to occupy them. But to Ruth and Agnes, as well as to Mr. Howbridge, Neale's dejection was very evident.

"Is the motor all right?" asked the lawyer of Neale, when the Martins had departed with their dog.

"Yes, she runs all right now."

"Then we might as well head for Cedar Island," suggested the lawyer. "The sooner you find your father the better."

"Yes—I suppose so," and Neale turned away to hide his sudden emotion.

Once more the *Bluebird* was under way, moving slowly over the sparkling waters of Lake Macopic. All traces of the storm had vanished.

"Mrs. Mac wants to know if we are going to pass any stores," said Agnes, coming up on deck when the island on which they had been stranded had been left behind.

"We can run over to the mainland if she wants us to," the lawyer said. "Is it anything important, Agnes?"

"Only some things to eat."

"Well, that's important enough!" he laughed. "We'll stop at that point over there," and he indicated one. "From there we can make a straight run to Cedar Island. You won't mind the delay, will you?" he asked Neale, who was steering.

"Oh, no," was the indifferent answer. "I guess there's no hurry."

They all felt sorry for the lad, but decided nothing could be done. Mr. Howbridge admitted, after Ruth had spoken to him, that matters looked black for Mr. O'Neil, but with his legal wisdom the lawyer said:

"Don't bring in a verdict of guilty until you have heard all the evidence. It is only fair to

suspend judgment. It would be cruel to raise Neale's hopes, only to dash them again, but I am hoping for the best."

This comforted Ruth and Agnes a little; though of course Agnes, in her loyalty to Neale, did not allow doubt to enter her mind.

The point for which the boat was headed was a little settlement on the lake shore. It was also the center of a summer colony, and was a lively place just at present, this being the height of the season.

At the point were a number of stores, and it was there the supplies for the Scotch housekeeper could be purchased. Ruth and Agnes had made their selections and the things were being put on board when a number of men were observed coming down the long dock.

One of them wore a nickel badge on the outside of his coat, and seemed to have an air of authority. Neale, who had been below helping Hank store away some supplies of oil and gasolene that had been purchased, came out on deck, and, with the girls and Mr. Howbridge, watched the approach of the men.

"Looks like a constable or sheriff's officer with a posse," commented Ruth. "It reminds me of a scene I saw in the movies."

"It is an officer—I know him," said Mr. Howbridge in a low voice. "He once worked on a case for me several years ago. That's Bob New-

comb—quite a character in his way. I wonder if he remembers me."

This point was settled a moment later, for the officer—he with the nickel badge of authority—looked up and his face lightened when he saw the lawyer.

"Well, if it ain't Mr. Howbridge!" exclaimed Mr. Newcomb. "Well now, sufferin' caterpillers, this is providential! Is that your boat?" he asked, halting his force by a wave of his hand.

"I may say I control it," was the answer. "Why do you ask?"

" 'Cause then there won't be no unfriendly feelin' if I act in the performance of my duty," went on the constable, for such he was. "I'll have to take possession of your craft in the name of the law."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Howbridge, rather sharply. "Is this craft libeled? All bills are paid, and I am in legal possession. I have a bill of sale and this boat is to be delivered to a client of mine—"

"There you go! There you go! Ready to fight at the drop of the hat!" chuckled the constable. "Just like you did before when I worked on that timber land case with you. But there's no occasion to get roiled up, Mr. Howbridge. I only want to take temporary possession of your boat in the name of the law. All I want to have is a ride for me and my posse. We're on the busi-

ness of the law, and you, being a lawyer, know what that means. I call on you, as a good citizen, to aid, as I've got a right to do."

"I recognize that," said the lawyer, now smiling, and glancing at Ruth and the others to show everything was all right. "But what's the game?"

"Robbery's the game!" came the stern answer. "We're going to round up and close in on a band of tramps, robbers and other criminals! They have a camp on an island, and they've been robbin' hen roosts and doin' other things in this community until this community has got good and sick of it. Then they called in the law—that's me and my posse," he added, waving his hand toward the men back of him. "The citizens called in the law, represented by me, and I am going to chase the rascals out!"

"Very good," assented Mr. Howbridge. "I'm willing to help, as all good citizens should. But what am I to do? Where do I come in?"

"You're going to lend us that boat," said Constable Newcomb. "It's the only large one handy just now, and we don't want to lose any time. As soon as I saw you put into the dock I made up my mind I'd commandeer the craft. That's the proper term, ain't it?" he asked.

"Yes," assented the lawyer, smiling, "I believe it is. So you want to commandeer the *Bluebird.*"

"To take me and my posse over to Cedar Island, and there to close in on a bunch of Klondikers!" went on the constable, and Neale, hearing it, gave a startled cry.

"Anybody on board that's afraid to come may stay at home," said the constable quickly. "I mean they can get off the boat. But we've got to have the craft to get to the island. Now then, Mr. Howbridge, will you help?"

"Certainly. As a matter of law I have to," answered the lawyer slowly.

"And will you help, and you?" went on the constable, looking in turn at Neale and Hank, who were on deck. "I call upon you in the name of the law."

"Yes, they'll help," said Mr. Howbridge quickly. "Don't object or say anything," he added to Neale in a low voice. "Leave everything to me!"

"Fall in! Get on board! We'll close in on the rascals!" cried the constable, very well pleased that he could issue orders.

Neale's heart was torn with doubts.

CHAPTER XXV

THE CAPTURE

Constable Newcomb and his posse disposed themselves comfortably aboard the *Bluebird,* and, at a nod from Mr. Howbridge, Neale rang the bell to tell Hank to throw in the gear clutch and start the boat.

The girls, much to Agnes' dissatisfaction, had been left ashore, since there was likely to be rough work arresting the "Klondikers," as the constable called the tramps on Cedar Island. Mrs. MacCall stayed with them.

They had disembarked at the point dock and when the boat pulled off went to the hotel there to await the return of their friends.

"Now, Mr. Newcomb, perhaps you can explain what it's all about," suggested the lawyer to the constable, when they sat on deck together, near Neale at the steering wheel. The lawyer made the boy a signal to say nothing, but to listen.

"Well, this is what it's about," was the answer. "As I told you, a parcel of tramps—Klondikers they call themselves because, I understand, some of 'em have been in Alaska. Anyhow a parcel of tramps are living on Cedar Island.

They've been robbing right and left, and the folks around here are tired of it. So a complaint was made and I've got a lot of warrants to arrest the men."

"Do you know any of their names?" asked the lawyer.

"No, all the warrants are made out in the name of John Doe. That's legal, you know."

"Yes, I know," assented Mr. Howbridge. "And how many do you expect to arrest?"

"Oh, about half a dozen. Two of 'em have a motor boat, I understand, but they had an accident in the storm last night and can't navigate. That's the reason we're going over there now—they can't get away!"

"Good!" exclaimed Mr. Howbridge. "I fancy, Mr. Newcomb, I may be able to add another complaint to the ones you already have, if two of the men turn out to be the characters we suspect."

"Why, have they been robbing your hen roost, too?" asked the constable.

"No, but two of my wards, Ruth and Agnes Kenway, were robbed of a box of jewelry just before we started on this trip," said the lawyer. "Two rough men held them up in a hallway on a rainy morning and snatched a jewel box. The men were tramps—and the day before that two men who called themselves Klondikers had looked at vacant rooms in the house where the robbery occurred. Since then the girls think they have

seen the same tramps several times. I hope you can round them up."

"We'll get 'em if they're on Cedar Island!" the constable declared. "Got your guns, boys?" he asked the members of his posse.

Each one had, it seemed, and the nervous tension grew as the island was neared. Hank drove the *Bluebird* at her best speed, which, of course, was not saying much, for she was not a fast craft. But gradually the objective point came into view.

"It's just as well not to have too fast a boat," the constable said. "If the Klondikers saw it coming they might jump in the lake and swim away. They won't be so suspicious of this."

"Perhaps not," the lawyer assented. But he could not help thinking how tragic it would be if it should happen that Neale's father was among those captured. Neale himself guided the houseboat on her way.

"Put her around into that cove," Constable Newcomb directed the youth at the wheel, when the island was reached.

Silently the *Bluebird* floated into a little natural harbor and was made fast to the bank.

"All ashore now, and don't make any noise," ordered the officer. "They haven't spotted us yet, I guess. We may surround 'em and capture 'em without any trouble."

"Let us hope so," said Mr. Howbridge. "Have they some sort of house or headquarters?"

"They live in a shack or two," the constable replied. "It's in the middle of the island. I'd better lead the way," he went on, and he placed himself at the head of his men.

"Don't make any outcry or any explanation if your father is among these men," said Mr. Howbridge to Neale, as the two walked on behind the posse. This was the first direct reference to the matter the lawyer had made.

"I'll do whatever you say," assented Neale listlessly.

"It may all be a mistake," went on the lawyer sympathetically. "We will not jump at conclusions."

Hank had been sworn in as a special deputy, and was with the other men who pressed on through the woods after Constable Newcomb.

Suddenly the leader halted, and his men did likewise.

"Something's up!" called Mr. Howbridge to Neale. They went on a little farther and saw, in a clearing, a small cabin. There was no sign of life about it.

"I guess they're in there," said the constable in a low tone to his men. "The motor boat's at the dock, and so is the rowboat, so they're on the island. Close in, men!" he suddenly cried.

There was a rush toward the cabin, and Mr. Howbridge and Neale followed. The door was burst in and the constable and his posse entered.

Three men were asleep in rude bunks, and they sat up bleary-eyed and bewildered at the unexpected rush.

"Wot's matter?" asked one, thickly.

"You're under arrest!" exclaimed the constable. "In the name of the law I arrest you! I'm the law!" he went on, tapping his nickel shield.

One of the men made a dart for a window, as though to get out, but he was knocked back by a deputy, and in a few seconds all three men were secured.

Neale, who had pressed into the cabin as soon as possible, looked with fast-beating heart into the faces of the three tramps. To his great relief none was his father.

"Now, what's all this about?" growled one of the men. "What's the game?"

"You'll find out soon enough," declared the constable. "Are either of these the men you spoke of?" he asked the lawyer.

"Yes, those two are the ones that several times went off in a hurry in the motor boat," said Mr. Howbridge. "But I can not identify them as the ones who took the jewelry. Ruth and Agnes Kenway will have to do that."

As he spoke the two men looked at him. One shook his head and the other exclaimed:

"It's all up. They got us right!"

"Come on now lively, men!" cried Constable

Newcomb. "Search this place, gather up what evidence you can, and we'll take 'em to jail."

"Are there any others?" asked Neale, hoping against hope as the men were taken outside the shack and the search was begun.

"I guess we have the main ones, anyhow," answered Mr. Newcomb. "Oh, look at this bunch of stuff!" he cried, as he threw back the dirty blankets of one of the bunks. "They've been robbing right and left."

It was a heterogeneous collection of articles, and at the sight of one box Mr. Howbridge exclaimed:

"There it is! The jewelry case I gave Miss Ruth! These men were either the thieves or they know something about the robbery. See if anything is left in the box."

It was quickly opened, and seen to contain a number of rings, pins, and trinkets.

"Well, there's a good part of it," the lawyer remarked. "It will need Ruth and Agnes to tell just what is missing."

Mr. Howbridge and Neale were watching the constable and his men finish the search of the cabin, while others of the posse had taken the prisoners to the boat, when suddenly into the shack came another man, whose well-worn clothing would seem to proclaim him as one of the "Klondikers."

But at the sight of this man Neale sprang forward, and held out his hands.

"Father!" cried the boy. "Don't you know me?"

"It's Neale—my son!" was the gasping exclamation. "How in the world did you get here? I was just about to start for Milton to look you up."

"Well, I guess, before you do, we'll look you up a bit, and maybe lock you up, also," said the constable dryly. "Do you belong to the Klondike bunch?" he asked.

"Well, yes, I might say that I do; or rather that I did." said Neale's father, and though the boy gasped in dismay, Mr. O'Neil smiled. "I understand the crowd has been captured," he added.

"Yes. And you may consider yourself captured also!" snapped out the officer. "Jim, a pair of handcuffs here!"

"One moment!" interposed Mr. Howbridge, with a glance at Neale. "I represent this man, officer. I'll supply bail for him—"

Mr. O'Neil laughed.

"Thank you," he said. "Your offer is kind, and I appreciate it. But I shan't need bail. I believe you received a letter telling you to make this raid, did you not?" he asked the constable.

"I did," was the answer. "It was that letter which gave us the clue to the robbers. I'd like to meet the man who wrote it. He said he would give evidence against the rascals."

"Who signed that letter?" asked Neale's father.

"I have it here. I can show you," offered Mr. Newcomb. "It was signed by a man named O'Neil," he added as he produced the document. "He said he's meet us here, but—"

"Well, he has met you. I'm O'Neil," broke in the other. "And it was I who gave you the information."

"Oh, Father!" cried Neale, "then you're not one of the—"

"I'm not one of the thieves; though I admit my living here among them made it look so," said Mr. O'Neil. "It is easily explained. One of the men made a fraudulent claim to part of a mine I own in Alaska, and I had to remain in his company until I could disprove his statements. This I have done. The matter is all cleared up, and I concluded it was time to hand the rascals over to the law. So I sent the letter to the authorities, and I'm glad it is all ended."

"So am I!" cried Neale. "Then you did strike it rich after all?"

"No, not exactly rich, Son. I was pretty lucky, though, and I struck pay dirt in the Klondike. I wrote your Uncle Bill about it, but probably the letters miscarried. I never was much of a letter writer, anyhow. And I never knew until the other day that you were so anxious to find me. I couldn't have left here anyhow, though, for I had

to straighten out my affairs. Now everything is all right. Do you still want to arrest me?" he asked the constable.

"No," replied Mr. Newcomb. "I reckon you're a friend of the law and, in consequence, you're my friend. Now come on, boys, we'll lock up the other birds."

Neale walked by the side of his father and it was difficult to say who talked the most. Mr. Howbridge accompanied the constable and from him learned how the raid had been planned through information sent by Mr. O'Neil.

When the party reached the houseboat, whither some of the deputies had preceded with the prisoners, the sight of a figure on the upper deck attracted the attention of Neale and the lawyer.

"Agnes!" gasped her guardian. "How did you get here?"

"On the *Bluebird.* I just couldn't bear to be left behind, and so I slipped on board again after you said good-by on the dock. There wasn't any shooting after all," she added, as if disappointed.

"No, it was easier than I expected," admitted the lawyer. "And, while you should not have come, this may interest you!"

"Our jewelry!" cried Agnes as she took the extended box. Quickly she looked over the contents.

"Only two little pins are missing!" she reported. "We shan't mind the loss of them. Oh,

how glad I am to get my things! And mother's wedding ring, too! How did it happen?"

"I think you have Neale's father to thank," answered Mr. Howbridge.

"Oh, I am so glad!" cried Agnes, and she was happy in more ways than one. "What did I tell you, Neale O'Neil?"

The *Bluebird* made a quick trip back to the point and the rascals were locked up. Two of them proved to be the thieves who had robbed Ruth and Agnes, though their ill-gotten gains did them little good, as they dared not dispose of them. The third prisoner was not involved in that robbery, though he was implicated in others around the lake. Eventually, all three went to prison for long terms.

Neale's father, of course, was not involved. As he explained, he had located a mine in Alaska and it made him moderately well off. But he had a rascally partner, and it was necessary for Mr. O'Neil to stay with this man until a settlement was made. It was this partner who had dealings with the thieves; and that had made it look bad for Neale's father. This man was arrested later.

As soon as he saw how matters were on Cedar Island Mr. O'Neil decided to give the evil men over to the law, and he carried out his plan as quickly as possible. The two "Klondikers" who had inquired about rooms from the Stetson family were part of the thieving gang, and they were

also later arrested. They were planning a bank robbery in town, and the two men who took the jewelry from Ruth and Agnes were part of the same crowd. The robbery of the girls, of course, was done on the spur of the moment. The two ragged men had merely taken shelter in the doorway, after having called at the Stetson house to get the "lay of the land." And as such characters are always on the watch to commit some crime they hope may profit them, these two acted on the impulse.

For some reason the bank robbery plans miscarried, and the two jewelry robbers started back for Lake Macopic, where they had left some confederates, including Mr. O'Neil's partner. The rascals imagined the Corner House girls were following them, hence the several quick departures in the motor boat. Whether one of these men looked in the window of Tess was never learned.

"I'm so glad our suspicions of Hank were unfounded," said Ruth, when later the events of the day were being talked over in the *Bluebird* cabin.

"Yes, that ring was his mother's," said Neale. "He told me about it after I had hinted that we had been watching him. And, oh, Father, I'm so glad I found you!" he added. "You're through with the Klondike; aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm going to sell out my mine and go into some other business."

"Do you mean back to the circus?" asked Mr. Howbridge.

"No. Though I want to see Bill and the others."

"Why don't you stay with us and finish the trip on the houseboat, Mr. O'Neil?" Ruth asked.

"Thank you, I will," he answered, after the others had added their urgings to Ruth's invitation.

And so, after the somewhat exciting adventures the trip was resumed, and eventually the craft was delivered to her owner.

Before this, however, happy days were spent cruising about Lake Macopic, the children and Mrs. MacCall enjoying life to the utmost. There were days of fishing and days of bathing and splashing in the limpid waters near sandy beaches. Tess and Dot were taught to swim by Neale, and his father made the children laugh by imitating seals he had seen in Alaska.

Hank, too, seemed to enjoy the vacation days, and he proved a valuable helper, forming a great friendship with Mr. O'Neil. During those days Ruth received two more letters from Luke and one from his sister. Luke was still working hard at the summer hotel, and Cecile reported that the sick aunt was now much better. Luke congratulated Neale on finding his father. And then, as was usual, he added a page or two intended only

for Ruth's eyes,—words that made her eyes shine with rare happiness.

"Oh, we had a lovely time!" said Agnes when they disembarked for the last time. "The nicest summer vacation we ever spent."

"Indeed it was," agreed Ruth.

"And when I get home I'm going to send Mr. Henry my doll and a kitten so he won't be lonesome on that island in winter," observed Dot.

"And I'm going to send Mr. Tom something," declared Tess. "He likes me, and maybe when I grow up I'll marry him!"

"Oh, what a child!" laughed Ruth.

"I'm glad you liked the trip," said the lawyer. "And I think we can agree that it accomplished something," he added as he looked at Neale and his father.

"It made my Alice-doll a lot better!" piped up Dot, and they all laughed.

And so, in this jolly mood, we will take leave of the Corner House Girls.

THE END

The CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON A HOUSEBOAT

HILL

BARSE